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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

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“I let my feet slip…
My mistake.”
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Mahiru let out a little gasp in a childish voice, not quite managing to say an actual word.

GAME OVER
?
“…Why did I just get ‘game over’? He didn’t hit me.”

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Amane Fujimiya

A student who began living alone when he started high school. He's poor at every type of housework and lives a slovenly life. Has a low opinion of himself and tends to put himself down, but is kind at heart.

Mahiru Shiina

A classmate who lives in the apartment next door to Amane. The most beautiful girl in school; everyone calls her an "angel." Started cooking for Amane because she couldn't overlook his unhealthy lifestyle.

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Afterword

What's Wrong with Liking What You Like?

Of all the animals, the one Amane liked best was the cat.

He liked most animals, but cats were special.

He had memories of begging his parents to take him to zoos, aquariums, and even farms when he was a young child, but ultimately, the creatures he felt the most affection for were the neighborhood cats. He liked them so much that he had always vaguely thought about getting one as a pet in the future, when he lived alone.

Despite that, as he grew older, he stopped openly saying that he liked cats.

Around the time he entered middle school, the house cat in his neighborhood had reached the end of its life span, and he'd stopped seeing it around. What's more, his classmates had made fun of him for liking cats, so he had learned to keep it to himself.

And now that Amane was in high school, he lived in an apartment building and rarely saw stray cats, so he never had the chance to play with any. Instead, he satisfied himself with watching cat videos online every day.

One of the channels that Amane frequented put out a photo book, and Amane went out of his way to order one the very day it was released.

Even though he had gone ahead and reserved a copy, the book was going on sale close to the Christmas shopping season, and Amane was worried sick that there would be some kind of strange problem at the bookstore.

He had spent the whole school day restlessly fidgeting, slightly on edge, and the only thing he had been able to think about was picking up the photo book on the way home and giving it a good read.

"Welcome home. I'm sure it was chilly outside. Would you like something warm to drink?"

Mahiru had gotten there before him. Amane froze.

Finding Mahiru in his apartment wasn't particularly strange in and of itself.

On top of stopping in at the bookstore, Amane had been tasked with buying the ingredients for that night's dinner at the supermarket, so he had gone shopping. It made sense Mahiru got back first, assuming she went straight home from school.

She came to greet him as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and she blinked several times in surprise when she saw that Amane had walked in with a pleasant look on his face.

"You've been in a good mood all day."

"Yeah, I guess."

He was much too embarrassed to tell her that he was in high spirits because he had acquired the coveted cat photo book, so he gave her a roundabout answer. Of course, that only seemed to make Mahiru even more interested.

"…Did something happen?"

"Ah, n-no, not really… It's nothing."

"That's not a 'nothing' sort of face, though."

"Really, it's nothing."

Out of embarrassment, he looked away and tried to change the subject. But apparently, that was even more suspicious, and Mahiru slowly narrowed her caramel-colored eyes.

They had a general unspoken agreement not to meddle in each other's private lives, but it would be a different matter if he had done something inappropriate.

From Mahiru's perspective, it was easy to see that Amane was acting suspiciously.

She stared at him intently.

His secret was nothing to feel guilty about, but it also wasn't something he wanted to just come out and talk about, so now he had to worry about her suspecting him of something more sinister.

His eyes darted around unconsciously, but that only made him seem even more suspicious. Mahiru's gaze grew extra sharp.

When her eyes fell on the bag from the bookstore, Amane held out the groceries, doing his best to distract her.

"It's really nothing; please don't worry about it. Would you put the groceries in the fridge for me? There are frozen things in here."

"I can see that, but something seems off."

"Don't worry about it, please, I'm begging you," Amane said.

As he pushed the supermarket bag into Mahiru's hands, the bag containing his book slipped off his wrist.

In a slight bit of good fortune, it happened after he had already handed her the other bag, so no one was hurt, but—the photo book he had been doing his best to hide fell to the floor with a loud thud.

If there had been a picture of a human on the cover, he might have still been able to explain it away, but the cover was an extreme close-up shot of a charming, round-eyed cat. Even as cute cat pictures went, this photo was really over-the-top.

Silence fell over the room. A wave of despair crashed into Amane.

Mahiru was just as frozen as he was at this sudden development, but she thawed out first and picked up the fallen photo book.

Amane braced himself for whatever she might say, but Mahiru just smiled gently at the cute cat on the cover.

"Oh, how adorable!"

Then she lightly brushed the dust off the photo book and handed it to Amane.

"By any chance, were you late because you went to buy this?"

"…Is that so bad?"

His voice was rather cold, mostly because of the incredible shame.

Mahiru didn't seem put off by his brusque manner of speaking. She simply wore a calm, pleasant expression.

"No, there's nothing wrong with that. I actually think it's wonderful. But it was a little suspicious how hard you tried to hide it, even though there's nothing to feel guilty about."

"I—I thought you would laugh at me."

"I'm upset that you were worried I was the kind of person who would mock someone for things they like. You know I wouldn't do something like that, right?"

"I—I do, but…there are people who would smirk and tease me for liking cats so much that I went out of my way to buy a photo book."

"It's not like it's immoral or anything, and it doesn't bother anyone else, so why shouldn't you be free to like cats or buy photo books if you want? Most people who scoff at other people's interests can probably find fault with just about anything."

With these truly openhearted words, Mahiru soothed Amane's lingering discomfort. For some reason, she looked relieved that there wasn't anything else in the bag.

"You didn't have to worry about something like that, Amane-kun. You were being so sneaky, I thought for a moment that you bought something indecent."

"There's no way!"

It was unavoidable that she would have such suspicions, especially when a high school boy was obviously trying to hide something, so it was mostly Amane's fault. He still felt a slight chill run down his spine at being falsely suspected.

The bookshop wouldn't have sold me that stuff in my school uniform anyway.

As that strangely logical argument crossed his mind, Mahiru said, "Well, I did think that it wasn't likely since it's you, Amane-kun."

She seemed to be understanding, so he decided to not share his retort.

"Let me make it clear that I would never buy anything like that… But out of curiosity, supposing that I had, what then?"

"I would ask you what you were planning to do with stuff you're not allowed to possess at your age. Not that I don't understand why you'd be interested, but that's something you shouldn't touch until after you've graduated high school."

"It's so like you not to say that it's obscene or dirty, Mahiru."

"Well, I might call you a pervert or something."

"I don't have anything like that, so relax already."

"Is that so? Well then, I'm not really sure what we're talking about." Mahiru cut the conversation off disinterestedly.

Without meaning to, Amane smiled awkwardly. Whether or not he had anything of the sort in his possession, that had nothing to do with Mahiru.

Neither of them meddled in each other's private life, and as long as they didn't cause any trouble for the other, they were free to spend their time as they liked.

I shouldn't have been so worried.

If he had acted normally, Mahiru wouldn't have paid any attention whatsoever to the photo book. Amane had been the cause of his own destruction.

Even though he still felt like an idiot, after what Mahiru had said, the clouds hanging over his head cleared up just a little bit. He felt as though a weight had lifted off his shoulders.

Whether she knew how Amane was feeling or not, Mahiru pointed at the sink with an easygoing expression.

"Go on, wash your hands and come inside. Even if you want to look at that photo book right away, first you need to do your coming-home routine."

"I know, I know."

Amane made it a habit to wash his hands, gargle, and change his clothes when he got home, and he was still planning on doing all that, so he wondered why she had made a point of telling him… As he wondered, Mahiru glanced away somewhat awkwardly.

“—Um…”

“Hmm?”

“…Could I look at it later?”

She didn’t say what she wanted to look at, but he knew perfectly well, so Amane didn’t even try to hide his smile.

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Yay, I thought it was a supercute kitty.”

“It sure is.”

“Why do you sound so proud…?”

Mahiru seemed a little perplexed, but even so, she didn’t make fun of him. Instead, she smiled at him gently.

Feeling that gentle expression warm his heart, Amane headed to the sink, somehow in a better mood than he had been in on his way home.

Daily Routine and Meals Worth Remembering

"…What are you writing?"

After dinner, Amane took care of the dishes. When he finished, he saw that Mahiru was sitting on the sofa jotting down some kind of note.

Initially, he wondered whether it might be a school assignment, but that didn't seem to be the case. It would have been rude to brazenly read the contents, so he couldn't get a good look at it.

Glancing at it as he passed behind her, he saw what looked like a list of dishes, written in neat letters.

Mahiru was used to Amane sitting beside her, and she didn't react to him taking the adjacent seat. She continued moving her pen in silence.

"It's the menu from last night's dinner. It's helpful later if I make a note of what I cooked."

Her slightly delayed answer was quite matter-of-fact.

"As the person who does the cooking, I decided I ought to keep track of these things."

"You're so meticulous."

"I'm just writing down what I made, so it's simple enough. I'm the kind of person who will pretty much eat the same things all the time, but that's not so great as far as nutritional balance."

When it came down to it, Amane was also the type who would be perfectly fine with eating the same thing over and over. But there was nothing better than getting to eat a variety of dishes.

Since Mahiru had a varied repertoire, she always tried to avoid repeating the same dishes. At most, she used the previous day's leftovers, such as curry or meat sauce, to make something new.

Without even having to think back on it, Amane knew that she had been incorporating a good mix of vegetables, meat, fish, eggs, soy, and dairy into their meals.

He was grateful when he thought about how much care she put into these kinds of details, but on the other hand, he also felt bad about it.

"How do I put this? I'm really grateful for everything you do. You have my respect."

"Stop that. I'm just doing this for my own satisfaction. It's easier to have a record when I'm trying to manage our nutrition. Plus, if anything ever happens, I'll be able to check whether there was anything strange in what we ate."

"I guess that's true, but it's still very thoughtful. Admirable, even."

"I'm not doing it because I want your praise, though. It's convenient to have later, so I'm making a habit of it. That's all."

"Even so, I think it's impressive."

"…Well, thanks."

He really thought she was amazing. Without exaggeration, she was terrific and so sincere.

"As someone who basically specializes in eating and can barely recall the names of dishes, I find it incredible that you came up with an idea like this."

"…Now that you mention it, for someone who specializes in eating, you do know a fair number of dishes once they're laid out on a table. And you have a good sense of taste, especially considering that before I started cooking for you, all you seemed to eat was instant ramen and ready-made food."

"At home, my parents…well, if I had to say, I guess it was my dad—my dad made me try all sorts of things, so I got to eat lots of good stuff."

Amane knew that his palate wasn't necessarily dull just because he didn't cook.

Just like how food critics aren't always expert cooks, it was possible to hone his sense of taste, even though he couldn't prepare the dishes he was tasting.

Amane's parents were good cooks, especially his father, and they were the type of people who had regularly taken him to various restaurants. This gave him plenty of opportunities to taste and compare a wide variety of foods.

Thanks to their efforts, Amane had been raised with a fairly discerning palate, which wasn't always a good thing.

"…I see. That makes sense. I had a similar experience."

Mahiru seemed to understand without feeling any particular discomfort about it, but her expression didn't brighten.

He was just guessing, but Amane figured that could be attributed to her home environment.

He didn't know all the details about Mahiru's situation, and he couldn't thoughtlessly butt in as an outsider, so he refrained from mentioning it any further and instead turned his gaze back to the paper that her pen had been running across until just a moment earlier.

"Can I take a look?"

"At this? I don't mind, but it's not particularly organized."

"I doubt that's true, but even if it isn't, I'd like to see it, if that's all right."

Without hesitation, Mahiru granted Amane's request and handed him the notebook.

After thanking her, he turned to the first page and saw detailed menus inside, going back about three months and ordered by date. Everything was written in Mahiru's tidy handwriting.

Her notes started on the day they had first eaten a meal together.

A nostalgic menu of miso soup, fish simmered in soy sauce, stewed greens, and rolled omelets was listed there, and he let a smile slip out at the vivid memory of it.

Amane flipped through the pages, musing that Mahiru's attitude toward him had softened quite a bit since that first meal and reminiscing as he revisited menu after menu.

Mahiru certainly incorporated all types of cooking, but looking at the menus collected like this, he noticed there was a lot of Japanese food.

It was common knowledge that Amane loved eggs, so dishes that incorporated them frequently showed up at their dinner table. He was keenly aware that Mahiru had been paying close attention to his preferences in more ways than one.

"Ah, these were sooo good."

As he was reading, Amane came across an entry for pouch eggs, probably his second favorite egg dish of Mahiru's, after her rolled omelets.

Mahiru seemed faintly pleased that he was excited but not at all surprised.

This dish was made by closing up eggs in fried tofu skins and simmering them in a sweet and salty broth, something that was not very difficult for Mahiru to do.

"They don't take too much work to make. They are tasty, though, huh?" she said softly.

Of course, Amane knew that anyone would probably be happy to hear that something they had made was delicious, but all the food Mahiru made was delicious, so it all came down to preference.

“…You really do love eggs, don’t you?”

“The egg is magnificent. It’s delicious whether you simmer it, bake it, boil it, fry it, steam it, or smoke it, and it’s chock-full of protein. I’d eat eggs every day if I could.”

“Sure, they’ve got good nutritional value, and I like to eat at least one a day, but I find it hard to appreciate them quite as much as you do, Amane-kun.”

“Really? I just like them so much.”

“…Do you want to eat some pouch eggs?”

“Huh?”

Amane stiffened at the sudden proposal, but Mahiru retained her usual calm expression. He hadn’t meant to make a request, but apparently, his impassioned declaration of love for eggs had given her ideas.

“I feel kinda bad.”

“Don’t. We’re about to run out of eggs anyway, so I was just thinking we should buy a new carton. Let’s see… Tomorrow’s menu is already set, but I can change what I was planning for the day after. Nutrition won’t be an issue if I make a few extra side dishes, so it’s an easy request to fulfill…”

“Really?”

Without meaning to, he stared at Mahiru in joy.

For some reason, Mahiru cleared her throat after she noticed him staring. Then she quietly answered, “…I don’t mind.”

Though it was low, Amane caught every word and let out a little “Yay!” Then his cheeks naturally softened into a smile. “All right! I’m looking forward to the day after tomorrow, then.”

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He was always excited for Mahiru's cooking, but hearing that she was going to make one of his favorites only heightened his anticipation.

They had a hellish marathon scheduled in gym class that day, for reasons he could not fathom, but Amane felt as if he could run his heart out as long as Mahiru's cooking would be waiting for him afterward.

"…It's worth making if it will make you happy. Then again, you are the type to tell me that everything is delicious, Amane-kun."

"I say everything's delicious because it is. Everything you cook is great, Mahiru."

"…Thank you very much."

"I enjoy eating every bite of food you make. You're always helping me out, so thank you."

He thought he was telling her his honest feelings, so he was slightly shocked when she blatantly avoided looking at him.

After fidgeting uncomfortably, Mahiru let out a quiet sigh. She seemed tired somehow.

"You won't get anything by flattering me."

"I bet I'll get a delicious dinner."

"…That's one of the things I really like about you, you know."

"What is?"

"Everything."

Finally, Mahiru turned away. Amane was worried that he had said something that hurt her feelings. Maybe because she could tell he was flustered, Mahiru did not make eye contact with Amane for some time.

Good Traits That Nobody Else Knows About

This person is at a disadvantage because the good parts of him don't really show through on the surface. This was a thought that Mahiru had about Amane.

He had always had a sharp tongue, and that alone gave people the impression that he was difficult to approach.

He wasn't foulmouthed in the sense that he said crude things or spat abuse at people, but he did have a habit of being curt. Though anyone listening carefully would quickly realize he never said anything out of line.

His looks weren't necessarily bad. If anything, he was rather handsome, but he had long bangs and a tendency to look down; plus, he often had a somewhat mean look in his eye that probably made it hard for people to get close to him.

Even Mahiru would never have known his true nature without circumstances giving her a push.

It's a waste in so many ways.

He's such a nice, considerate boy when you take a good look at what's inside, but no one sees that.

With that thought, she looked over at Amane, who was quietly completing his schoolwork beside her.

Amane wore an unfriendly expression on his face, but he was just calm and composed, moving his mechanical pencil across the page wordlessly, not appearing to notice Mahiru's gaze. He seemed to be really concentrating. He didn't even glance at the coffee he had poured himself.

Mahiru picked up her mug, trying to make as little noise as possible, and quietly sipped her coffee, which had gone cold.

Amane must have more or less figured out Mahiru's preferences, for underneath the bitterness of the coffee was the taste of just enough sugar to impart a faint sweetness, as well as creamer that made the drink mellower.

Amane had apparently listened to her grumble that she couldn't stand intense, acidic coffee and had started keeping a different brand in his apartment.

She had initially shot him a look that said *This is your house, so you should get the coffee you like*, but with a look of feigned ignorance, he had smiled and said, "This coffee is better, isn't it?" so she couldn't say anything more on the matter.

Mahiru got a little worked up when she thought about how he was often doing considerate things like that. She was about to take another sip of coffee when Amane looked up.

"…Don't tell me it's bad?"

"No, not at all. I was just taking my time and appreciating how tasty it is."

"Ah, okay, I'm glad you like it. Maybe I've gotten a little better at making it?"

She saw the area around his eyes soften in relief, and Mahiru naturally smiled as well.

"Well, that's because the last time you made it, you put in too much coffee grounds and then added so much hot water into the filter that it overflowed. I remember wondering why you poured it so vigorously."

"Oh, that was because my hand slipped. I haven't done that again since then."

"Heh-heh. Failure is a stepping stone to success, so if you were able to learn from your mistakes, then that spilled coffee paid off."

"…Don't tease me too much."

"I'm not teasing!" she insisted with a smile.

"That face says otherwise," he grumbled quietly, but he didn't complain further, so he must have understood that Mahiru wasn't truly laughing at him.

Amane pouted a little, which made him look a bit childish. Cute, even.

Mahiru mused that he would probably be more approachable if he made such expressions more often, but somehow, she also didn't want him to show that face to anyone else, and she didn't suggest it to Amane, either.

"…Are you taking a break, Mahiru?"

"Yes. I finished the assignment already, so I thought I would rest a short while."

"Mm, in that case, I think I'll take a quick break, too. I'm tired of working on this."

Amane threw his arms up and took a big stretch before gently rolling his shoulders. Then he stood up and headed for the kitchen.

"I think I'm going to have a snack. Do you want anything in particular?"

He looked back at her after taking a peek in the snacks box, and Mahiru answered, “I’ll leave it up to you.”

Basically, almost all the food in Amane’s apartment was now stuff that either of them could eat.

Of course, he had his name written on things that he wanted for himself, but aside from those, it was all shared. Mahiru had heard that resentment over food could be terrible, but neither of them was that attached to specific things, so daily life had been peaceful.

They had set up a communal box for storing snacks, but since both of them added things they were proud to have found or that they recommended and wanted the other to eat, it was so full it actually never ran out.

Amane added things that he guessed Mahiru had never eaten, as well as any new products that went on sale, regardless of whether they were sweet or salty, while Mahiru mostly contributed sweets. This was just a matter of preference, and there were times when Mahiru also ate the salty snacks.

But lately, Amane had been casually buying baked treats that he thought Mahiru would like, so it had become necessary to diligently check the best-before dates. As expected, purchases from a patisserie spoiled faster than commercial products with lots of additives.

Amane had apparently gained a sense for that sort of thing since he started living with Mahiru. He took the baked sweets that he had placed near the front of the box and set them on a plate to bring over.

“I just grabbed the first ones, is that all right?”

“Thanks for bringing them over. I’ve got more time to spare, so I should have gotten up to go get them.”

“Don’t worry about it; I was closer to the kitchen. Plus, it was my idea.”

Amane returned to his seat with a little smile, so Mahiru stopped getting up and sat back down, taking up Amane on his offer. She picked up a cookie package and opened it.

Mahiru didn’t eat all that much, but she enjoyed tasty treats. She was grateful that Amane considered her preferences when he bought the baked sweets.

She took small bites of her cookie, being careful not to drop any crumbs, and savored the rich flavor of butter that filled her mouth and the sweet aroma that reached her nose.

And yet it wasn't greasy at all. Instead, it was light on the tongue, and though she was very curious how much of this and that went into the recipe, there was no way she would be able to tell, so she settled for devouring it with relish.

Amane's judgment and sense of taste sure are reliable, she thought without a hint of sarcasm as she munched on her cookie. For some reason, Amane looked very amused as he watched her eat.

She knew he wasn't making fun of her, but for some reason, the soft look in his eyes really bothered her.

"…What is it?" she asked, after swallowing every last bite.

Amane seemed hesitant, "Well, how should I put this…?"

"Was I doing something funny?"

"N-no, that's not it, but well…you're just cute, like a little animal."

"…Is that a compliment?"

"It was supposed to be."

She knew it was just his reaction to seeing how she ate, but Mahiru couldn't help but turn away, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and happiness.

…Sometimes, he's really bad for my heart.

Amane was fundamentally the kind of person who always told the truth. On occasion, there were things that he wanted to hide or tried to explain away, but he never told lies that would hurt someone.

He was quite an honest person, even though he didn't seem like it at first, which made Mahiru all the more embarrassed by his comment. Her eyes darted around the room.

Even though she was used to receiving compliments, this was what happened to her whenever she got one from Amane.

Amane himself, possibly thanks to the way his father raised him, was the type of person who always knew exactly what to say to make people happy, so in a sense, he was trouble.

He paid attention to the smallest things, which was hard on her heart in all sorts of little ways.

Recently, he had casually come out to meet her when he knew she would be getting home late.

Even though it must have been a lot of trouble to change his hair so he wouldn't be recognized, he didn't mind taking the time to get ready.

Whenever they walked together, he matched Mahiru's pace and thoughtfully positioned himself between her and the road. If she had bags, he smoothly took them

from her, and if she was feeling unwell, he never failed to notice immediately and always looked after her without a second thought.

Amane was more sensitive to changes in her appearance than she expected, and he often complimented her new hairstyle or clothing.

To add to that, once Mahiru started spending a lot of time at his place, he moved the things she used often into lower spots where her arms could reach. He had also acquired a small step stool, in case she needed to reach anything higher up.

She felt grateful whenever Amane tried to address hardships that she had hardly even realized were there. But Amane never said a thing about it and acted as if it was all completely natural. Chances were good that he would be a force to be reckoned with in the future.

Although she had initially thought that he was a helpless, foulmouthed, sloppy, undisciplined person, once that slovenliness and curtness disappeared, he turned out to have quite an admirable personality, and she didn't even have to look that hard to find it.

Yes, Amane is a good neighbor, a good friend, and a good—

Her train of thought made it that far before she cut herself off and shook her head, flustered.

"Is something wrong?" Amane asked with concern, seeming surprised by her sudden movement.

Hoping to conceal the turmoil of her inner thoughts, Mahiru smiled a little. "…Amane-kun, I wonder why you're not more popular with girls?"

"Why does it feel like you're suddenly picking a fight with me…?"

This time, Mahiru was the one who had said something foolish. Without him knowing what she had been thinking, it had probably sounded as if she was making fun of him.

"Sorry, that's not what I was trying to say. I was just thinking that it's strange how there aren't more people who want to be friends with you, since you have such a nice personality."

"Even when you put it that way, I feel like I just had my unpopularity thrust into the spotlight. That said, I've never had much to do with other girls anyway, so I think I've got bigger problems than being unpopular…"

The only girl Amane regularly interacted with at school was Chitose. The other people at school thought he was rather gloomy and not very cool. It was clear that his good qualities were not at all apparent.

"Maybe it's because I never really wanted to be popular in the first place."

“Is that how it is?”

“I don’t know about other guys, but that’s especially true for me since I’m not looking for a girlfriend… As long as I eventually meet somebody I want to spend my life with, I think it’s fine that I’m not particularly popular right now.” He seemed to have trouble getting the words out and mumbled them quietly, unable to hide his embarrassment.

Mahiru felt a gradual heat rising deep in her chest, and her mouth softened into a smile.

“…Amane-kun, you—”

“What? You want to call me a dreamer?”

“No, I think it’s wonderful. You’re a very devoted person.”

“…Feels like I’m being teased again.”

“Now, why would you think that? Geez…”

Mahiru really didn’t know why Amane had interpreted her words that way. She poked him in the side, and Amane frowned awkwardly before turning away.

She thought she saw his mouth move slightly, but as for the words that might have slipped out, she couldn’t get him to tell her what they were, no matter how many times she asked.

Another Major Cleaning Operation, and Trouble

Mahiru liked cleaning a fair bit.

Right after they had met, she had been kind enough to help Amane clean his apartment, and she had completed the task extremely skillfully and thoroughly.

Amane also tried his best to clean and maintain things, but once in a while, Mahiru would check and point out places where he had been careless.

Of course, she didn't nag him incessantly. It was more like explaining ways to make dirt easier to remove or suggesting ways to make daily maintenance easier, so Amane was always grateful for her input.

"I shouldn't be surprised you tend to overlook grime in places that get wet. Looks like you've been cleaning the places you can see, but there's some left around the back and in the corners. Basically all the places that are hard to get a look at."

Mahiru peeked in suddenly while Amane was cleaning his bathtub and immediately noticed a spot of grime he had missed.

She was wearing a little smirk, as if she had suspected as much.

Just as she'd pointed out, there were spots of black mold on the rubber seal around the shower door and in the back of the shampoo shelf.

These places were hard to see, so he hadn't noticed the mold, but now that Mahiru had pointed those spots out, they were going to bother him.

Amane had started paying attention to all sorts of things after cleaning with Mahiru the year before, but of course, she made him realize that he still had a long way to go.

"Bathrooms are humid even if you ventilate them, and it's easy for black mold to crop up. Especially in corners and blind spots like this rubber seal. This is what happens if you don't make a conscious effort to clean them."

"You're right."

"…I'm not scolding you, okay? I mean, if you just kept going and didn't pay attention, this is exactly the kind of grime that ends up plaguing most households."

Mahiru nodded earnestly and insisted that it was a common problem, but when she noticed Amane scrunching his shoulders up, she smiled awkwardly.

"Don't look so defeated. I think you've done a great job cleaning everywhere else."

"Thanks for saying that, but…"

"You just have to pay attention to it from now on, so don't mope about it. If you have time to feel bad about it, then you can take care of it right away… Actually, would it be all right if I helped?"

Mahiru slapped her upper arms for emphasis, eager to put her skills to use. For some reason, there was visible excitement in her eyes.

Either because she liked cleaning or because she was just a naturally helpful person, it actually seemed more like Mahiru wanted to clean rather than like she was resigned to it.

Amane knew that failing to pay attention to the details was one of his weaknesses, so it helped to have her point things out, and her offer to help clean did make him happy.

At the same time, he felt incredibly guilty about letting her do it.

"…Isn't that unpleasant for you, Mahiru? Cleaning someone else's bathroom?"

"I don't really mind. But does it bother you? It's not an exaggeration to say that this is your private space."

"I'm not particularly bothered by you seeing it. After all, you've used my bathtub before. It's a little late to be embarrassed."

She had once forgotten her key at Chitose's house and spent the night in Amane's apartment, and she had already used his bath on that occasion. Plus, she often used the sink that was right outside the bathroom, giving her a clear view of the interior.

In that sense, it was too late to feel bashful, but he was worried about whether Mahiru was all right with entering the bathroom of a member of the opposite sex.

"…Th-that's true, but—"

"I can't speak too highly of myself since I'm the one getting the favor, and I will take you up on your offer if you don't mind, but I can also do it myself if I need to. Though I will ask you to supervise."

He was grateful she was checking his work, since he was likely to overlook spots of grime, but for some reason, Mahiru seemed ever so slightly agitated and was letting her gaze drift around the room.

“…N-no, I’ll do it, if that’s all right. A bathroom is too cramped for the two of us to clean together anyway.”

“Really? I feel kinda bad making you spend a precious day off doing this.”

“No, it’s fine. I like cleaning.”

“In that case, I’ll leave it to you. I’ve got no other plans, and you’re being so generous, so I think I’ll go clean the kitchen. I want to try polishing the sink.”

Naturally, letting Mahiru clean while he relaxed by himself would be terribly rude, and he wouldn’t be able to stand the pangs of conscience, so Amane intended to clean something else on his own.

The other day he had just happened to see a video of someone polishing a sink, and it had piqued his interest, so he decided to take this opportunity to challenge himself.

The important thing seemed to be to take the time and polish it thoroughly and evenly. Amane figured that even he should be able to do it.

“Do you have all the right tools? You need waterproof sandpaper and a polishing agent.”

“…I’ll go buy them now.”

It was something he had suddenly made up his mind to do, so it wasn’t as if he had the tools on hand. He was about to make a shopping run, but Mahiru’s exasperated look was painful.

“Right, I thought you’d say that. I’ve got both in my apartment, so I’ll give you some. It’s best to get all your cleaning supplies together ahead of time.”

“I don’t suppose I should be surprised. You’re so thorough, I feel bad.”

“Well, the very fact that you felt like you wanted to do it is a big deal.”

“Don’t try to be nice about it.”

“Heh-heh. All right, I’m going to change. I’ll bring the stuff back with me.”

“…It must be some serious work if you’re going to the trouble of changing clothes.”

“I’m about to do some serious cleaning, understand?”

At the moment, Mahiru was dressed in a long gray skirt with a herringbone pattern, plus a matching black knit top. It was a subdued and modest outfit that suited her well.

She probably could have cooked as usual in those clothes, but they looked as if they would be very difficult to clean in, and he had no doubt that it would be a disaster if she got detergent on them and bleached the fabric.

He quietly mumbled something about her once again dressing in a cute outfit that looked difficult to move in, and Mahiru pressed her lips tightly together, then ground her fist into his waist for a reason he really didn't understand. Of course, it wasn't exactly a punch, so it wasn't really painful. He just felt a light pressure.

"What was that for all of a sudden, Mahiru-san?"

"…Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"You're pressing awfully hard over nothing, though."

"It's nothing."

Amane was bewildered. Clearly it wasn't nothing, but Mahiru turned away and hurried out the door.

When Mahiru returned from changing her clothes, she handed Amane a metal polishing kit, and he quickly got to work on the sink. She had changed into casual clothes, wearing pants with her hair up in a bun, and went straight into the bathroom wearing rubber gloves and bursting with motivation.

She had been all fired up to do the cleaning, so Amane timidly left her to it, figuring it was all right to accept the favor.

Determined not to be outdone, Amane started going to work on the sink, sandpaper in hand.

He properly ordered the sandpaper by grit, carefully smoothing out any scratches that had originally been on the sink surface, while taking care not to scrub too hard and cause new ones.

Since he lived in a rental apartment, there were also probably traces from when the people before him had lived there. The sink wasn't filthy, but its surface was cloudy, a far cry from the glistening new ones he saw on television.

He polished patiently, trying to cut through the cloudiness, and his mood improved when he realized on the second set of sandpaper that the metallic luster was steadily coming back.

With visible results, his enthusiasm soared, and Amane, who had always been the sort of person who found it difficult to stop once he focused on something, continued polishing away in silence.

Suddenly, when he looked to the side, he saw Mahiru standing beside him, silently watching him work. He had no idea when she had gotten there.

"…Say something if you're in here! You totally startled me."

"Sorry, you seemed really focused, so I didn't want to interrupt."

"You still could have said something, but…did you finish cleaning?"

“No, right now I’m letting some stubborn grime soak, so I’ve got an hour to spare. I’m taking a short break.”

Amane couldn’t help but smile as Mahiru explained all this with deadly seriousness, as if issuing a grim warning that letting the detergent penetrate was crucial for getting rid of grime.

“Amane-kun, you…still have a ways to go, huh? It’s looking better, but it’ll take a while before you get that to a mirror finish.”

“I’ve got one more sheet of high-grit sandpaper to go through. After that, I’ll wipe it down with a cloth soaked in the abrading agent. This is a lot of work…”

“Well, it takes time and effort to make something look nice. You can shorten the life span of the sink if you polish it too hard, though, so please be careful.”

“’Kaay.”

Indeed, since the sink was rental property, he understood that going overboard was strictly forbidden. After all, the owners of the building ought to take care of general maintenance.

“By the way, have you been polishing this whole time?”

“I guess so. I really got lost in it.”

“This kind of work is fun, isn’t it? That’s the good thing about cleaning.”

“Well, I’m not taking it as seriously as you do, Mahiru.”

“You say that, but you don’t look like you’re taking a break anytime soon. It’s just as important to get a proper amount of rest, Amane-kun.”

With an elegant laugh, Mahiru took out a glass and opened the refrigerator.

“Are you thirsty, Amane-kun?”

“We’ve got some orange juice in there, so I’d love it if you’d pour me a glass.”

“Got it.”

Apparently, she was going to get Amane a drink.

He was grateful for her consideration. She took out the orange juice that he had purchased earlier and poured a glass.

For some reason, she stuck a straw in it and held the glass to Amane’s mouth.

“Here you go.”

She was offering him the juice with a grin, but it was obvious that she had no intention of letting him take the glass from her.

She pointed the straw carefully toward him, as if urging him to drink, and held it to his mouth.

“Thank…you?”

“Your hands are dirty, so I thought this would be the best way to do it.”

It was true that his hands had gotten stained with black liquid while he was polishing, but he could have easily washed them. He didn't need Mahiru to go out of her way to take care of him like that, but she didn't show the slightest sign of backing down.

He glanced over at Mahiru, and she looked back at him with an invigorating smile, as if to say she had only the best intentions.

"…Won't I look really dumb?"

"I don't think so…probably not."

"Probably not, huh?"

"Just joking. But that black stuff won't come off unless you wash your hands really well, so it would be extra effort to do that when you're still in the middle of the job, right? That's why I think this is more efficient."

"That may be true, but—"

If that's the issue, couldn't you just set it beside the sink? Amane thought. But he knew that even if he said that, Mahiru wasn't going to relent.

He figured that there was no use in arguing further, and when he gave up and put the straw in his mouth, Mahiru's smile of satisfaction grew.

As the fresh, tart sweetness of the orange juice spread through his mouth, Amane concealed the bashfulness that was slowly welling up inside him.

"…Is it good?"

"Mm, it's good. Thank you."

Since she had only filled about half of a glass that wasn't that large to begin with, he quickly finished the juice and thanked her.

While he was at it, he shot her a look that said *You don't need to do that again*, but Mahiru just chuckled softly.

"Please call me anytime you want a drink, okay?"

"No, next time I'll wash my hands like normal and get it on my own."

"Oh, too bad."

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Now she's teasing me.

Every so often, Mahiru did things like this. It made him wonder if giving him a jolt to the heart was a game for her. They were minor things, but her pranks always gave him quite a shock.

This time, although she was undoubtedly teasing him, she also had good intentions, so he couldn't even complain.

Exasperated, he shot her a reproachful look, but Mahiru laughed happily again.

Mahiru went back to her own cleaning, and Amane scrubbed the sink over and over again, changing the grit of the sandpaper as he went, until all that was left was the final polish.

The sink was already mirrorlike, and he knew that it would shine even more beautifully once he put on the finishing touches.

Thinking it was about time for the final polish with the abrading compound, Amane had just washed his hands so he could search for an old towel when the loud noise of something large falling over rang out from the bathroom.

He dashed over without even turning off the running water, expecting the worst, and saw Mahiru on her backside. It looked as if she had collapsed.

She seemed kind of stunned and didn't try to get up, even as she got soaked by the spray of water from the shower nozzle that had also fallen on the floor.

"Are you okay?! I heard a really loud noise just now?!"

"I let my feet slip… I'm not injured, but my butt hurts. That was my mistake."

As if Amane's voice finally broke the spell, her eyes darted around the room in shame as she looked up at him.

Apparently, she had slipped and fallen while rinsing the walls. There were still little clumps of bubbles in the corners of the tub, pushed there by the overflowing water, and Mahiru's clothes were completely soaked through where she had been hit by the spray on her way down.

"Sorry; this is because I left the cleaning to you…"

"No, I was the one who suggested it, so…"

Amane turned off the running shower right away and offered his hand to Mahiru, who was still sitting on the floor looking up at him. "You didn't twist your ankle, did you?" he asked. "Can you stand?"

Mahiru cast her eyes downward in embarrassment, then gingerly took Amane's hand. "I just landed on my rump. I was crouching to begin with, so I didn't have that far to fall. It only made so much noise because the washbasin fell down with me. It was my fault, so don't worry about me."

"No, I'm definitely still worried, and…you're dripping wet, too…"

Amane planted his feet firmly on the floor as he helped Mahiru up. He did not want to let her fall down again. He looked her over once more, to confirm that she wasn't injured, and froze.

Mahiru had been soaked by the running shower. And her clothing, which she had chosen for cleaning indoors, wasn't very wintery, just a simple long-sleeved white shirt and a pair of leggings. That fact spelled Amane's doom.

Her tight-fitting clothes gained a terrible destructive power when they got wet. The silhouette of her body was extremely apparent, as was the color and shape of what she was wearing underneath.

Under her shirt, Amane could see the color of her skin, and he caught a glimpse of something lime green showing through the fabric before averting his eyes in a panic.

Amane felt like he might die of shame if he looked directly at her, and he could imagine how upset Mahiru would be if he stared.

On the other hand, he knew that she would suspect something if he blatantly avoided looking in her direction, so once he helped Mahiru up, Amane grabbed a towel from the adjacent changing room and somehow managed to wrap it around her shoulders without looking.

However, Mahiru apparently realized the awful state she was in, and she appeared to take Amane's act of desperation as one of kindness, so she smiled at him.

Seeing her smiling face made it even harder for Amane to look directly at her, and he turned away.

He felt as if he wanted to punch himself for thinking such perverse thoughts, even for a moment, but he somehow used reason to calm his overly excited body.

"I'll lend you a change of clothes, but if you want to go home after you change, you should wait until you're dry. If you go outside wet in this temperature, you'll catch a cold."

"Thank you very much for your concern… But if I look so funny that you have to turn away to laugh, I'd rather you just laugh in my face."

"Why would you think I was laughing?! Your shirt's see-through, so I was just trying not to look!!"

He had been doing his best to evade the subject and give her a chance to change, but since Mahiru had groundlessly misunderstood his intentions, he had snapped at her without thinking. Now he was in real trouble, because Mahiru's cheeks were turning red.

She glanced down at her own body, and her face flushed in an instant, then she quickly pulled the towel closed around her. Amane could finally catch his breath.

That said, he still couldn't meet her eye and was letting his gaze wander around the room.

"Uh…um, r-really, thanks for your concern…"

"…It's mostly my fault for letting you do the cleaning, so for now, if you would get changed, I'd appreciate it. If you want to take a shower to warm up, that's okay, too. I'll bring you some fresh clothes."

Mahiru probably did not envy Amane in this situation. And Amane found it hard to stay rational, alone with her.

He found the perfect excuse and made his escape.

After passing Mahiru some clothes, Amane again focused intently on polishing the sink.

He wanted to preserve his willpower of steel, but certain urges were steadily eroding it, threatening to make it collapse. In an attempt to scrape them away, he emptied his mind as he polished the sink with the abrading agent and tried to the best of his ability to banish the earlier incident from his thoughts.

Mahiru had gotten quite chilly, so she was taking a shower. He could hear the sound of water running and striking the floor from the bathroom.

There's a girl taking a shower in my home.

When he had this objective thought, he realized the unthinkable reality of the situation and shook his head to quickly dispel any wild fantasies.

Beating himself up for his thoughts, he polished away at the sink, trying to clear any uninvited ideas from his mind. It wasn't exactly a flawless finish, but the metal now smoothly reflected the light well enough that he could see his own face on the surface.

The face that he saw reflected in the sink was bright red. He knew that he had to get ahold of himself before Mahiru came back.

It was no laughing matter that his feelings of guilt, born from shame and pangs of conscience, were stronger than his excitement at finishing the polishing.

Forget it, forget it.

Figuring that he was probably about done with polishing, Amane rinsed away the last of the abrading agent from the sink and then washed his hands.

Then he vigorously splashed his face with water. If he couldn't get the terrible heat under control quickly, he wouldn't be able to face Mahiru. Over and over, he splashed himself with the cold wintertime water, enjoying how it cooled his face and head. He was still splashing when he heard the sound of the fittings on the bathroom door creaking open.

He knew that she would be coming out before too long, so as he forced his pounding heart to settle down, he put one spoonful of honey and a splash of milk into a mug for Mahiru and stuck it in the microwave.

Just as it finished warming up, Mahiru slowly emerged from the changing area, slapping the floor with her slippers as she walked.

"…Thanks for letting me borrow your clothes," she said to Amane, who was still in the kitchen. She had just gotten out of the shower, so warmth was radiating gently off her and into her surroundings.

In reaction to the earlier incident where her shirt got soaked, Amane had intentionally chosen to loan her a sweatsuit that was too large so that her silhouette wouldn't show.

Thanks to that decision, she looked very comfortable in his house clothes, but for some reason, her appearance still made his heart pound, and he couldn't help but feel that he was never going to calm down, no matter what he did.

"Here you go. Take this, too."

"…Thank you very much."

He had more or less gotten to the point where he could look directly at her again, so keeping himself as calm as possible, he took the hot milk out of the microwave, stirred it with a spoon, and then handed it to Mahiru.

Mahiru liked sweets, and when she noticed the smell of the honey, she smiled gently. Then she looked at the sink behind Amane, and her smile grew.

"Oh, you finished that beautifully. You really worked hard at it. Good job."

"…I guess."

He wasn't going to tell her that he had done it to drive away his worldly desires, so he just nodded and gave her a vague reply. Then Amane casually brushed past her and sat down on the sofa.

As he was taking deep breaths, Mahiru also trotted over and sat beside him, making it impossible for him to settle down. The fact that he could smell the scent of his own body soap wafting toward him made it all the worse.

When he glanced over at her, he saw her hands poking out of the sleeves of the much-too-large clothing, gripping the mug as she earnestly blew on it to cool down its contents.

She looked strangely adorable as she brought the drink up to her mouth once, immediately pulled away because it was too hot, then glared at the offending mug with a frown.

Though from her perspective, she was probably just trying to cool down her milk, the oversized clothing made her look especially small and adorable.

Even an unfashionable sweatsuit looked cute when Mahiru wore it. What a terrifying thing a beautiful girl could be.

After struggling for some time, Mahiru happily sipped her hot milk once it finally reached a drinkable temperature. She must have noticed Amane looking at her, because she took her mouth off the mug and cocked her head.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Uh, no…just worried that you might be hurt."

Amane wasn't lying, but he wasn't telling the whole truth, either.

He was concerned that Mahiru might have hurt herself in the fall, and he was also concerned about her catching a cold. However, at the same time, quite a lot of his mind was occupied by his agitation at having seen the suggestive curves of her body when she was completely soaked, even though she hadn't actually exposed any skin.

Mahiru had no doubts about Amane's words, and she frowned in vexation, then chuckled. "…Sorry for being such a bother today."

"No, don't be silly. I'm the one who caused trouble for you. Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm fine now, it doesn't even hurt to touch my backside where I hit it… I'm not letting you touch it, though. Got that?"

"I wouldn't!"

"Just joking."

Mahiru snickered at Amane's instant response. Still grappling with his complicated feelings, he grumbled quietly, "…Don't tease me."

"It's just that you seemed kind of down. I was the one who suggested I clean, so there's no need for you to fret over it, Amane-kun."

"This only happened because I didn't pay attention while cleaning on my own, so I do feel bad."

If Amane had cleaned properly on a regular basis, Mahiru never would've needed to roll up her sleeves, meaning there also wouldn't have been any opportunity for her to get soaked in the first place.

"Well, I can't deny that, but it's quite a difficult task to get everything perfectly clean. You don't have to look so sorry."

"…Even so—"

"Oh, come on. Everyone makes mistakes when they're doing something unfamiliar. You just have to be careful next time… Now you know what to look for when you're cleaning, right?"

"I'm taking this deeply to heart."

"Great. So don't worry so much, okay?"

Amane was seriously contemplating the fact that he had neglected the grime, which had led to Mahiru's fall and her subsequent accident, but Mahiru must have taken his demeanor as an expression of earnest apology. A small smile appeared on her face.

She set her mug down on the table and used the extra length of her sleeves to slap at Amane, trying to cheer him up. "Don't be so down in the dumps!"

Naturally, since Amane was on the taller side, and especially since he had purposely given her clothes that were too big even for him, Mahiru had quite a lot of extra sleeve to work with. They had so much extra fabric that if she didn't put her arms through them and roll them up, they covered her fingers with enough extra to fold over on themselves.

Evidently, she had decided to weaponize those sleeves and seemed to be having fun whacking Amane with them.

"Owww."

"You sound like a robot!"

"No, really, it hurts, it hurts!"

It didn't, of course, but the adorableness of her actions caused some noticeable pangs in his chest.

Mahiru had no way of knowing that was happening as she scolded Amane sweetly with a cherubic smile.

To Amane, it was unbelievably cute, and he wasn't sure what to do.

"I'm good already, just relax… Well, I am still sorry that you ended up having to change, though."

"I fell down all on my own. If anything, this showed me that I need to watch my footing. I feel bad that I had to ask you to lend me a change of clothes."

“No, but…”

“Stop. If we go back and forth on this any longer, you’re going to start another pity party in your brain, so this ends now. Got it?”

Mahiru smiled somewhat impishly after gently covering Amane’s mouth with the extra-folded-over sleeve, and Amane also couldn’t help breaking into a grin.

Vowing to shove the memory of what he had seen as far down as he possibly could, he looked at Mahiru in the baggy sweatsuit again.

“Do you want to go home for a bit and change?”

He made the suggestion assuming that it must be difficult to move around in such baggy clothes and that she’d prefer wearing her own clothes, but to his surprise, Mahiru shook her head slowly.

“No, I’ll stay like this a little longer.”

“…Okay.”

Mahiru hid her mouth with the excess sleeve, but he could tell from the way the area around her eyes softened that she was feeling bashful. For some reason, he felt an intense urge to pat her on the head.

“…You’re pretty tall and skinny, aren’t you, Amane-kun? I was shocked by the size of these pants. The waist is surprisingly small.”

“I guess that’s because overall, it’s harder for me to put on weight than it is for girls.”

“I’m a little jealous. I knew that, but I still envy you.”

Amane figured there was bound to be a difference between men and women, since men generally have higher metabolisms than women and therefore have a harder time gaining subcutaneous fat, but that was neither here nor there.

With a very serious look on her face, Mahiru slid right up to Amane, who shrank back. Without any hesitation, she patted his waist with her palm.

Amane knew he was on the slender side, so he figured that as long as she wasn’t talking about muscles, he had no reason to stop her, and he decided to let her do as she pleased.

And then as he was holding still, he was suddenly filled with the intense urge to go back and wallop the Amane who had chosen those clothes for her about an hour earlier.

He had chosen his largest sweats, with the goal of obscuring her figure so that he wouldn’t think about her body. But now his strategy was completely backfiring.

He didn’t feel comfortable with fabric pressing against his throat, so he preferred sweatshirts that were made somewhat loose in the neck, but that had been an inappropriate choice to give to Mahiru.

Since she was so small, the neck of the shirt slouched forward, and the fabric was pulled down by gravity, leaving a large gap between the shirt and her body.

He could see her translucent, milky-white skin through the neck opening.

He could see that, just as the fabric obeyed the law of gravity, so too did it heavily emphasize the weight of those things that Mahiru had and Amane didn’t—the things that formed a great white valley that was normally hidden from view.

Amane looked to his heart’s content at the bounty that had been wrapped in light lime green and wet cloth earlier. Then he averted his eyes with great force.

His heart was thumping loudly.

She’s gotta do something about leaving herself so defenseless in situations like this.

On the whole, he didn’t think that Mahiru was particularly careless.

She did not wear revealing clothing in public. Usually, she chose sturdy, protective garments that only allowed the skin on her hands and face to show. Her modesty was almost admirable.

And yet here they were.

Even though Amane had caused the issue, at the moment, Mahiru wasn’t considering the position of his face. She probably never thought that Amane would look there. She was in a defenseless state on account of her trust in him, he thought.

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From the back of his mind, he recalled the sight of her wet underwear and curvy silhouette, and his heart pounded loudly again.

"…Amane-kun?"

When he heard her say his name in a voice that was less suspicious and more curious, Amane bit his lip and stood up with great force.

He heard a small, cute exclamation but couldn't look in her direction.

"…I, um…I think I'll take a shower, too. I got sweaty doing all that polishing!"

As soon as he said that, Amane attempted to flee the scene, retreating from Mahiru, who, while innocent, still possessed great destructive power.

Leaving behind her bewildered voice, Amane burst into his bedroom, grabbed some clothes, and escaped to the bathroom, feeling ashamed and despicable for looking directly at them, even if for just a moment.

Only a minute passed before, this time, Amane fell down in the bathroom, and Mahiru came running in a panic.

Who's Spoiling Whom?

"…What are you doing?"

Mahiru looked at him suspiciously when she arrived to make dinner. Amane was just cleaning up the cardboard from a package that had suddenly arrived courtesy of his parents.

The look in her eye that said *This wasn't here yesterday* was only natural, Amane thought, but he was just a passive recipient who also had no clue about this.

It was plain to see that the package was oversized for Amane. The thing was the right size to push up alongside a low table, and when he struck it gently, it made the rustling sound of little pellets faintly rubbing against one another as they fell.

"It came from my parents, as a congratulatory gift for making it to the next school year. Have you never seen one before?"

The unsolicited package contained a big beanbag that took up tons of space. A huge cushion, big enough to sit on, of the sort that he had seen advertised on TV and the internet.

Beanbags had been quite popular for several years, and Amane thought they were common knowledge, but Mahiru didn't seem to know about them.

"Well, I've heard rumors about them for a while. It's like an evil sofa that sucks you into a vortex of your own depravity and idleness once you sit down, right?"

"What kind of overblown rumors have you been hearing?"

Though he was a little taken aback by her describing the beanbag as a sinister object or whatever, he knew that the cushion was indeed supposed to feel so nice that once you sat down, you'd lose the will to move, so he couldn't necessarily refute her statement.

This particular beanbag was rather long and large enough for two people to sit on it at once.

It was obviously too big for just one person. Clearly, Amane was not meant to sit on it alone.

I can feel them pressuring me to sit with Mahiru…

He was sure that otherwise, his parents would have sent something a little smaller.

Sure enough, a long time ago, by which he meant when he was in middle school, Amane had told his parents he wanted a cushion like this one. But they had rejected his request, since at that time he had been incredibly lazy and had slacked off in all sorts of ways.

They must have thought that wasn't an issue anymore, though Amane expected that the reason why he wasn't lazy anymore was because Mahiru was by his side.

With an exasperated sigh, he put the dark blue slipcover onto the beanbag and then stared at it.

He would have appreciated it if they'd asked him if he had any space in his home before sending such a bulky object. But they seemed to have been counting on the fact that his room had been tidy when they had checked in around New Year's and that Amane wouldn't let it get cluttered with Mahiru around.

"…This is really huge, isn't it? Will you put it in your room?"

"I think that's the only option. I don't have much in my room, so there's space for it, but Mom always does things like this out of the blue, geez."

For now, he had gotten the beanbag out of the packaging and pulled the cover on, but there was no way he could leave it in the living room. He had just barely gotten it in there for the time being by moving the low table out of the way.

For better or worse, Amane's bedroom contained a bed, a desk for schoolwork, a small bookshelf, and nothing else. A beanbag of this size would make it a little difficult to open the closet, but it would fit.

"Shihoko-san always commits when she decides to do something, doesn't she? Even so, it's awfully big."

"…Sure is."

"It's so big you could probably lie down on it."

If Shihoko had been there, Amane could have imagined her saying, "*Why don't the two of you sit on it together?*"

A guy and girl sitting close together on something like this would be too much. Everyone knows that.

While Amane was thinking up comebacks to say to the imaginary mother cackling joyfully in his head, he looked over at Mahiru and saw her staring intently at the beanbag.

He could tell from the way she talked that she had never seen a real one before, but it seemed to have caught her interest.

Her eyes, which always had a gentle light behind them, were more animated than normal. They sparkled brightly, revealing her curiosity. She was buzzing with impatience.

Mahiru slowly extended a hand toward the big beanbag…and withdrew it before she could touch it. She was probably being mindful not to touch other people's belongings without asking.

"…I put the cover on, so wanna sit?"

"Ah!"

She seemed so restless that he suggested it without thinking, but he got a little shriek in response.

As far as Amane was concerned, if Mahiru was that interested in the beanbag, then she should go ahead and just try it. That's what he had been thinking when he made that suggestion, but she was so openly flustered that he worried he had actually said something weird.

"N-no, um, I—I appreciate you offering, but…the owner should enjoy it first."

"You look like you want to sit on it, and I'm not worried about all that. I'm sure my mother sent it hoping you would sit on it, too, so if you want to sit, go ahead and sit."

"Ah, um…i-is it really all right?"

"I wouldn't say that if it wasn't. I don't really mind who uses it first. You seem curious, so I'd rather have you try it out first."

"O-oh…w-well then, I'll take you up on that."

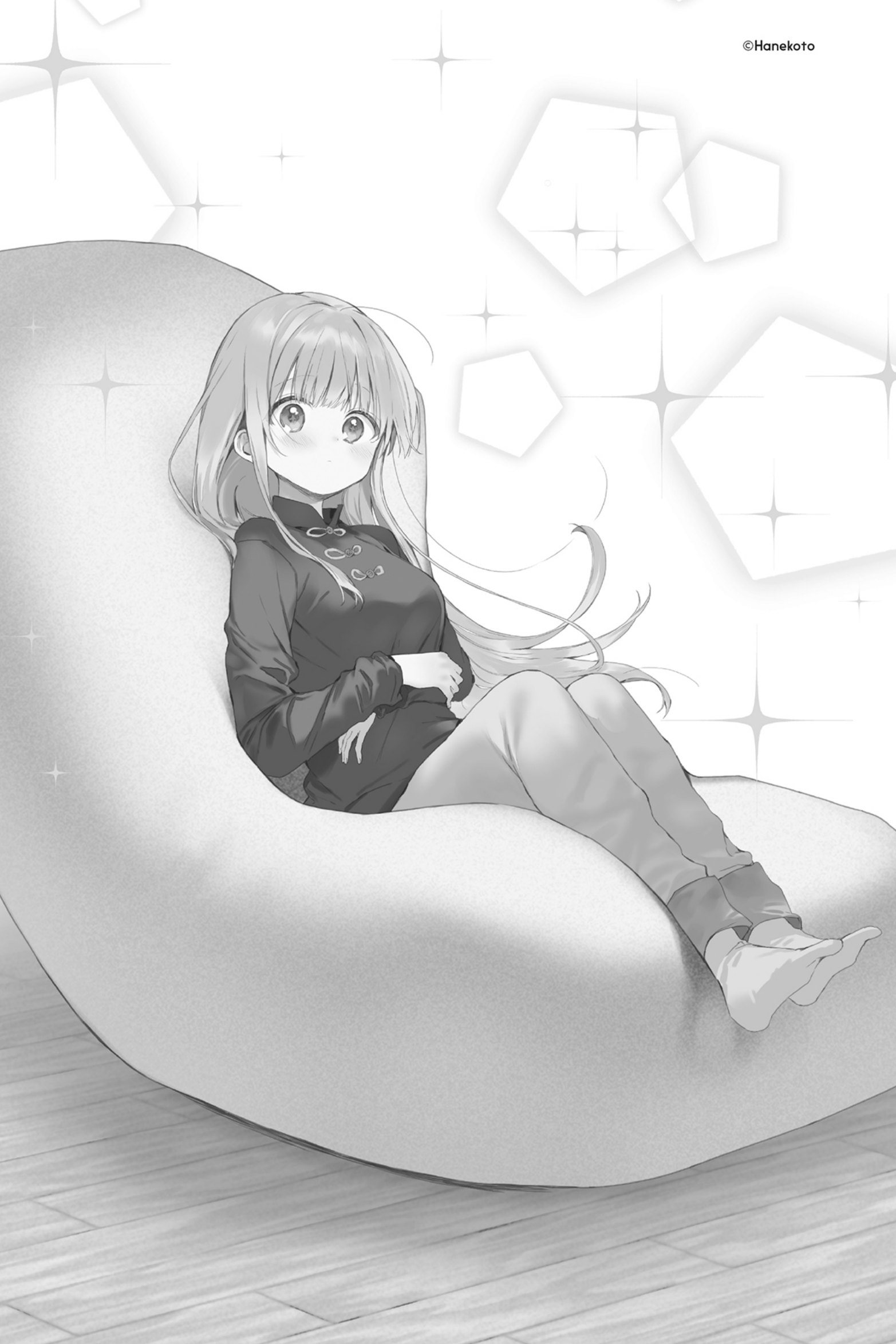
Mahiru said she wouldn't hesitate, but she approached the beanbag timidly, seeming to hold back as best she could. Then with some hesitation, she lowered herself onto the cushion.

It made a little rustling sound and contorted into a different shape to envelop Mahiru's dainty body.

She must have felt strange sitting so much lower than she would on a normal sofa. Mahiru blinked several times in surprise and looked down at the beanbag beneath her.

After that, she wriggled around to adjust the way she was sitting, then stood up and sat back down again.

After checking the way she sank slowly into the beanbag, she leaned her body weight as far back as she could and stretched out like she was going to take a little nap. In a livelier voice than usual, Mahiru mumbled, “This feels amazing.”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Amane was pretty sure she hadn't said those words for him to hear.

Mahiru seemed to have immediately fallen captive to the shifting beanbag's allure. She rolled around, searching for the most comfortable position.

Thank goodness she wore pants today, Amane thought earnestly as he watched her.

She had thrown herself down on the beanbag with complete abandon, so if she had been wearing one of the voluminous skirts she usually had on, even if it had been long, he might have been able to see her underwear.

As he watched Mahiru enjoy the beanbag, Amane felt quite sated, even though they hadn't eaten dinner yet.

Mahiru was overwhelmingly adorable on the occasions when she played around and showed her childish side, and Amane couldn't help but smile as he watched her. But then, whether she realized what he was feeling or not, Mahiru looked at Amane and beckoned to him.

"You might as well get on here, too, Amane-kun. Come here."

He was sure she was inviting him with the best of intentions, wanting to share the fun and comfort of the beanbag, but if he sat down next to Mahiru, their bodies would definitely stick together.

No matter how dainty and small Mahiru was, or how big the beanbag sofa was, if the two of them sat on it together, they would never be able to keep their distance.

"N-no, I…I think I'll hold off."

"…You don't want to?"

"Th-that's not it, but, um, it's just, how do I put this…uh…"

He tried to come up with a good reason for refusing, but when Mahiru peered up at him in confusion, he lost the willpower to say anything.

The devil inside him whispered problematically in his ear, "*It's basically like cuddling, which you do all the time, so it shouldn't be a problem, right?*" He groaned, but…he gave in to Mahiru's pure good intentions and his own desires.

Once I sit down, I'm sure Mahiru will see the reason why I'm so reluctant.

He took a seat beside her.

Both the nice feeling of sinking down into the cushion as the beanbag hugged his body and the warmth and scent of Mahiru beside him overwhelmed his senses.

The feeling of his body sinking into the beanbag was a little different because Mahiru was there, but even so, he could tell how nice it was. He could understand why so many people wanted a beanbag, just from the feeling of sitting on that one.

But at the moment, he was distracted from the sensation of the beanbag sofa by Mahiru beside him, her guard completely down.

"Isn't it incredible? It molds perfectly to your body!"

"…That's definitely true."

"Seems like it would be fun to relax here. You could read a book or watch a movie… If you took it easy, I bet the hours would just fly by," Mahiru mumbled in a soft and somehow intoxicated-sounding voice.

More relaxed than she had been earlier, she leaned lightly against Amane and sighed.

Even though she had been saying something really adorable, for some reason it came off a little sexy, which Amane attributed to the fact that he could feel her body heat.

"…Well, how can you help it when it feels so nice? That's why I don't want to sit on it. I just know it'll ruin me."

"Heh-heh, I understand how you feel. When it feels this nice, it immediately makes you want to slack off."

Amane's lips threatened to soften into a smile at these unexpected words from Mahiru, who was normally so disciplined. But she was leaning against his shoulder and nuzzling her cheek against him in apparent delight, and he couldn't let himself get lost in the moment.

He knew that she probably didn't mean anything by those fawning gestures of hers.

She often headbutted him to hide her embarrassment, but this time she was leaning her whole weight on him, her body almost melting into his, and snuggling up against him to boot.

A fragrance wafted up from her hair that was both sweet and refreshing.

He knew that she had showered earlier because they'd had gym class that day. It was quite the temptation for Amane to take in that scent from so close up.

He glanced down at Mahiru, and through the gaps in her gently flowing hair, he could see the smooth, milky-white nape of her neck. He swallowed loudly as he basked in her radiance.

Amane couldn't tell whether Mahiru, who looked so loose and relaxed that she might have been in heaven, had noticed his stiffness or the sound from his throat.

Mahiru glanced up at Amane and put on a languid smile that made her look even more angelic than usual, then leaned heavily against him again.

...I'm spoiled, in so many ways.

He knew that he needed to say to Mahiru that they would need to get up and fix dinner soon.

But he didn't want to ruin this moment of pure bliss with words, nor did he want to pull away from her warmth, so Amane swallowed the quiet words when they rose to the surface and buttoned his lips tight.

That night, they had instant ramen for dinner.

Childhood Anxieties, and Reassurance in the Present

Lately, Mahiru had been spending basically every weekend at Amane's place.

She gave a very characteristic explanation that she was concerned about his unhealthy lifestyle. But the truth was that she actually just wanted to be with the person she liked.

Of course, it was important to both her and Amane to have their alone time, and she understood that she needed to use some restraint, so she never barged in uninvited. She secretly, but attentively, observed and checked his reactions to make sure that Amane wasn't bothered or annoyed by her presence whenever they were together.

Happily, Amane never chided her for being in his home. He welcomed her in as if it was the most natural thing, and he actually smiled when he saw her. Sometimes, she worried she might be getting the wrong ideas.

How simpleminded do I have to be to get this *happy just from paying him a visit?* Mahiru laughed at herself a little, and sure enough, her expression softened as she did.

She slapped her cheeks lightly to gather herself and compose her face.

Then, using her spare key, Mahiru entered Amane's apartment.

She stepped into the entryway but didn't hear a sound.

Her first thought was that he might be napping in his room, but then she saw that the sneakers Amane usually wore were missing. It took her another moment to realize he had gone out.

If she had to say, she would have described Amane as a homebody, so it was unusual for him to go out at that hour. She was half-surprised and half-worried and unsure what to do next.

...I wonder if it's all right for me to relax here without asking. I'd be the only one here, too…

She did have a spare key, and she had gotten permission to come and go as she pleased, but she still wasn't sure about staying and making herself at home when Amane wasn't there.

"You're welcome to go on in, even if I'm not home. It's not like you would do anything bad, Mahiru."

"I wouldn't, but are you sure you approve of me going into your private space on my own?"

"You want to go in my bedroom?"

"No, that's not what I mean, but…you're not worried that I might go in, that I might see something?"

"Even if you did go in, there's nothing in there, so I'm not worried about it. But I don't think you're the type to go snooping in my bedroom, so feel free to relax in the living room whenever you want."

Even though they had already talked about it beforehand, it was still another person's home, and she was a little—more than a little—hesitant.

They usually contacted each other if they were going to be out late, so based on the fact that he hadn't gotten in touch, she didn't think that Amane would be gone for very long.

There shouldn't be anything wrong with just waiting inside for a little while.

Feeling guilty that she might be doing something she wasn't supposed to, Mahiru timidly removed her shoes and stepped into the living room. The place felt very still and quiet with no one at home.

The familiar smell of Amane's apartment was comforting, but the space also seemed somewhat dreary and lacking something, because the person she liked was not there.

She plopped down on the sofa as she always did and leaned against the back.

Normally, when she sat on the sofa, she had Amane beside her. Once they had both finished all their chores, when they were relaxing, they sat on the sofa like this and had leisurely conversations or quietly spent time together.

Now Amane was not there. His body heat, which was warmer than Mahiru's; his subtle, fresh scent; his calm voice that wasn't too deep and was easy to listen to; his body, which had become slim but sturdy and didn't yield even when she leaned against him—all these things were missing.

Once it really sank in, Mahiru felt lonely.

"…I hope he comes back soon."

She laughed a little at the words that escaped her lips—even though she was the one who'd said them, they sounded terribly lonely.

Even though it had been her choice to enter and wait for him, part of her wanted to control Amane's time and felt incredibly alone when he wasn't around, even though she was accustomed to being on her own. It was equal parts ridiculous and pitiful.

She sighed at her own selfishness and let herself sink further into the sofa.

Mahiru was used to waiting. She had only been alive for a short sixteen years, but she had spent most of that time waiting for something. For many years, she had waited, before finally giving up.

This was different. She was waiting for someone she knew was coming back.

Even though she knew that, when she recalled the events of the past, she felt an awful tightness deep in her chest.

…Sitting here like this reminds me of waiting so long for my parents.

She had locked away the bad memories in the depths of her heart, holding them at arm's length, but now they reared their heads again.

The memory of waiting alone for her parents, never knowing if they were coming back, filled her mind with a vengeance.

For almost as long as she could remember, there had never been anyone in Mahiru's house.

Her family had rented out one whole floor of an apartment building, which was more than enough space. It was a pleasant enough place to live, with all the furnishings and modern conveniences anyone could hope for.

Mahiru had lived alone in that home.

To put it more accurately, her family wasn't there. Only Koyuki-san, her housekeeper and governess, but even she came and went. Mahiru's real family, who should have been there, had vacated the house.

Her parents were busy with work and rarely ever came home, as if they wanted nothing to do with Mahiru at all.

But it wouldn't have been socially acceptable for them to abandon her, so they spared no expense to pay for Koyuki-san's labor and Mahiru's education, providing for their daughter at the same time they abandoned her.

She became aware of that abandonment and realized that her situation was abnormal after several years in elementary school. That was when she recognized that she was the victim of child neglect. She also later realized that her mother had a lover.

She realized it precisely because she was cleverer than other children and because she wanted to be loved by her parents more badly than other children. Even though that realization marked the end of her innocent childhood.

"Mother?"

One day, when Mahiru was about halfway through elementary school, she was delighted by one of her mother's rare appearances at home.

Overjoyed at seeing her normally absent mother, Mahiru rushed over to her and spoke to her with a smile, but her mother didn't answer. It was as if Mahiru didn't even exist. Her mother did not so much as look at her or even turn to face her. She was holding some sort of document in her hands.

Mahiru determined that her mother had come home for some reason connected to her job and knew that she mustn't get in her way. But still, Mahiru was happy to see her after so long, and she did not pay close attention to her mother's demeanor before talking to her.

"Um, while you were away, Mother, I worked very hard. I worked hard on my tests, and my sports, and I got lots of first places!"

As she reported that she had made great efforts at her studies and athletics while her parents were away, Mahiru grabbed the hem of her mother's clothes with a smile…then her mother finally turned toward her.

It was the first time she had ever faced her mother directly.

Before then, she had seen her mother from a distance, or from behind, but that was the first time her mother had been so close and so clearly looking at her.

Mahiru had heard from Koyuki-san that her mother's face did not really resemble hers, and sure enough, the woman before her was beautiful, but there was an unapproachable strength to her. If anything, Mahiru had gentle features that resembled her father. Her mother was the exact opposite of Mahiru. She was sharp and severe in every which way.

The woman reflected in Mahiru's eyes looked down at her own daughter with a cold, unfeeling gaze and shook her off.

The movement wasn't that violent, since she was dealing with a child, but the rejection was clear. Mahiru lost her balance and fell on her backside.

She looked up, overcome with surprise, but there wasn't the slightest bit of warmth or concern in the woman's gaze.

Just when she thought she had finally gotten her mother to acknowledge her existence, her mother looked at her as if she were a pebble by the side of the road, and that was when Mahiru finally understood. She unfortunately realized.

—I'm not wanted.

The nausea rising gradually inside her and the horrible pounding of her heart stopped her from having any further thoughts.

But once that idea fully coalesced, it led the way to answers about all her parents' actions to date, in rapid succession.

Why was she so neglected?

Why didn't her parents ever come home?

Why did her mother reject even her touch?

...I am not loved, and I am not wanted.

Her mother's gaze as she watched Mahiru realize all these things was all the confirmation she needed.

...As far as Mother is concerned, I'm not needed.

Mahiru had put Koyuki-san on the spot many times, asking her why things were the way they were, but after seeing her mother like that, she had been quick to figure it out.

She wasn't needed, so her mother hadn't taken care of her. She wasn't wanted, so her mother hadn't looked after her. Her mother had given birth to her, then abandoned all the duties and privileges of parenthood.

That was why her mother hardly ever showed her face at home and why she passed right through, either not noticing or brushing Mahiru away even when she reached out.

While Mahiru was still sitting there, grappling with the sudden awareness of her unbelievably cruel reality, her mother left, and all Mahiru could do was watch her go.

Too late, she reached out her hand, but it hung in the air and didn't grab anything. Mahiru had nothing left. She had never had anything to begin with.

She couldn't tell whether the drops spilling onto the floor were tears or something seeping out from where her delicate heart had been mercilessly gouged out of her chest.

The only thing she could say for certain was that she was not loved.

No matter how hard she worked, if she was not loved, no one would ever notice her efforts, so they were meaningless.

"Why?"

As she spoke that question aloud, a violent, heartbreaking emotion spilled out from inside her, and she sobbed loudly in her empty home.

She had stopped crying by the time Koyuki-san came to the house. But she couldn't muster her pure smiling face as she had before, not even for her beloved Koyuki-san. Something like resignation filled her body, and her smile became stiff and drawn.

What if she rejects me?

If she had known nothing, Mahiru might have clung to Koyuki-san and cried.

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But knowing that she was unloved by her own mother, Mahiru grew scared. Koyuki-san had always respected Mahiru and cherished her—she was almost like a parent to her—but that was because it was her job.

Not even her own parents loved her, so there was no way that Koyuki-san loved her.

Mahiru knew that if she embraced Koyuki-san, she was sure to ask. She would ask if Koyuki-san loved her.

Of course she doesn't.

Even though Mahiru's parents didn't love her, she didn't want to make Koyuki-san their substitute and was terrified of being rejected by her as well.

Afraid to even check, Mahiru held back the concerned Koyuki-san with a meager smile and covered her chest to hide where it was sodden from her tortured crying.

Mahiru was hurt by her mother's rejection, but even so, she didn't give up on love completely.

She hung her hopes on the tiny possibility that if she became an even better child, her mother might look her way.

Mahiru worked as hard as she could, more than ever before, hoping to catch her mother's attention, wishing she would just glance at her.

She would have been happy with even one word of acknowledgment, a single bit of praise.

That alone would have been reward enough for her efforts.

Ultimately, she did improve her schoolwork, and her athletics, and she polished her appearance, but her parents never took notice.

Even though many people seemed to have a favorable impression of her, even though she became an honor student, even though she grew into the good looks she inherited from her parents, they never looked her way.

For what it was worth, whenever she saw her father, he would say two or three awkward words to her, but that was all. He didn't really see Mahiru, inside or out, and instead always averted his eyes guiltily.

He probably felt conflicted when he laid eyes on the girl who was born out of one night's indiscretion in a marriage arranged for political reasons.

If they hate looking at me so much, they should have chosen not to have me.

I never asked to be born.

How good it would have felt to be able to say those things out loud.

But by that time, Mahiru had mastered stifling her judgment and emotions, and she said nothing. She simply swallowed her gloomiest feelings and stuffed them deep down in her chest.

Even though her heart ought to have been clogged by a thick layer of murky, stagnant emotions, instead it was empty, with a bitter wind howling in the void.

It was cold, miserable, and painful.

Mahiru didn't know what she could do to fill that hole in her heart.

Or rather, even though she knew what would fill it, she also understood that it was something she couldn't have.

Love—such a short little word, but no matter how Mahiru tried, no matter how she reached for it, she couldn't even see it, and her hands always came away empty.

Even though she was a beautiful child, fit to be lauded as a model little girl, she never got a scrap of love from her parents, something that other children probably took for granted.

For better or worse, Mahiru clearly took after her parents, which everyone seemed to regard as a good thing. And her efforts bore fruit as she added to her skills and grew into a well-rounded, beautiful individual.

In the later years of elementary school, when the differences between the boys and girls became apparent, she began to get constant attention from the opposite sex.

By that time, she understood what she needed to do to win people's favor and how to conduct herself so no one would hate her, and she committed to behaving that way.

She molded herself into what most people would consider to be the ideal girl: humble and unpretentious but refined and gentle enough that she wouldn't be seen as groveling, treating everyone with kindness and courtesy and never showing favoritism.

And with that, her angel persona came into being.

It was a warped part of her.

As a result of her solidifying into perfection on the surface, no one could tell that on the inside, she was riddled with holes, and she grew into a young woman whom everyone envied.

She lived an empty existence, never knowing love despite being adored.

Though she knew how hollow that was, Mahiru never stopped improving herself.

Maybe she could fill her empty heart if everyone liked her.

Maybe she could get her parents' attention.

Maybe she could get them to actually understand her and love her.

Filled with those withered, fleeting hopes, she made these wishes to no one in particular.

"There's no way that will happen."

That wasn't an answer that she received from someone else but rather the answer that spilled forth from inside herself.

"Even when I try my hardest, neither Father nor Mother have ever looked my way, have they?"

Her sneering voice echoed loudly in her ears, seeming to double back on itself.

"I thought it would be all right if everyone liked me, but that turned out to be wrong, didn't it? If they only like me for what I'm pretending to be, I'll never get anyone to love the real me. The thing everyone likes is a mask I've put on. I'm just strangling myself. No one sees me for who I am."

Having drawn this conclusion, Mahiru twisted up her face and laughed—

Then Mahiru sensed warmth beside her and slowly opened her eyes.

A familiar, subdued scent was right beside her. When she looked toward the warmth with wavering, unfocused eyes, she saw the body of a person who had not been there a moment before.

She felt safe in the pleasant warmth and pressed her cheek against it… Then she heard a quiet laugh.

"Good morning."

The smooth, gentle voice was just what Mahiru had been searching for.

She turned her face toward the source of the voice with sluggish movements, and there was Amane, looking at her with a tender expression and kindness in his eyes.

An instant later, Mahiru realized that she was leaning against Amane, and she sat up in a hurry.

Amane had come home without her realizing it, and she had no idea when she had drifted off.

"…D-did I fall asleep?" she asked timidly.

Amane nodded readily. "Sure did. When I got home about an hour ago, you were asleep, so I decided not to wake you up, but after I sat down beside you, you gradually fell over onto me, and I let you be."

"S-sorry. Not only did I let myself in while you weren't home, I completely nodded off…"

"I really don't mind at all, but you do fall asleep a lot at my place, huh?"

"Agh—"

She couldn't deny that Amane's place was comfortable, or that she had a tendency to fall asleep there. All she could do was groan quietly.

Mahiru had to admit he wasn't wrong.

The first time that Mahiru had dozed off during one of Shihoko's visits had truly been an accident, but every time after that, it had been because she trusted Amane and let her guard down around him.

It was unthinkable for Mahiru to fall asleep while anyone was beside her, but Amane alone was special.

She liked him and felt at ease with him by her side; plus, she was confident that Amane wouldn't try anything.

When he was next to her, she was calm, in spite of her heart pounding. She figured that was the effect of Amane's measured intimacy and reassuring presence.

He respected Mahiru and cherished her and looked out for her. That confidence let her always feel safe and sound with him.

"I try to make this a place where you feel like you can really relax… Though it didn't seem like you were able to sleep soundly this time."

"Huh?"

"You were crying out a little in your sleep. Like you were having a bad dream or something."

She had apparently let some words leak out while she slept. It must have been the effect of remembering the past while she napped.

Mahiru wasn't sure how to explain it to Amane, who was looking at her with concern in his eyes. All she could do was put on a vague smile.

"…Yes, I suppose you could say it was a bad dream."

"I see… Better not to ask?"

"I don't really mind you asking or anything…but I don't think it would be very fun to hear. If anything, I think it would just make you uncomfortable."

She had explained her upbringing to Amane before, so he wasn't much of a fan of her parents. She hadn't told him any stories that would make him like them, because she didn't have any.

Amane knew almost everything about her situation, and he couldn't help but hold some not-so-nice feelings toward her parents. And Mahiru, when she looked back now on her mother and father from an outsider's perspective, recognized that they really were not good people.

...Even so, they did give birth to me, and more than anything, I wished they would love me. I was just a child.

Unconditional love, at least, did not exist between Mahiru and her parents.

All Mahiru had wanted was for them to acknowledge her, so she had reached desperately toward them. If asked whether that was real love, she would have to say no.

From the way that Mahiru hesitated, even Amane seemed to sort of guess what kind of dream she had been having. He seemed rather unsure how to proceed, so Mahiru smiled in response to his anxious expression.

"It's not that big of a deal, okay? I was just having a dream about how I used to spend a lot of time waiting by myself. No one came home, and no one paid attention to me. That's all."

No matter how long she waited, her parents never came home to Mahiru. They never saw her for who she was. That was her dream of being small.

"…Even though I tried hard, ultimately I was nothing more than a product of circumstance. I thought they might pay attention to me if I was outstanding, but instead, it gave them an excuse to avoid dealing with me, and there was even less reason to see me. I understand that now."

After being brushed aside, she had tried to become an even better kid, but that hadn't helped. Acting out and causing a little bit of trouble for her parents probably would have gotten her more attention. There wouldn't have been the slightest bit of love there, though.

It was too late for all of that, and now that Mahiru had reached her current age, she no longer sought love from her parents, so she no longer thought about ways to get it. But she often considered the unanswerable question of how her future might have been different if she had behaved differently in the past.

As she laughed quietly at herself for pondering pointless *what-if*s, a strong, sturdy hand plopped down on top of Mahiru's head.

She turned her gaze toward Amane, wondering what made him do that all of a sudden, and saw him frowning in obvious vexation, his expression wavering in a look of regret.

"…I'm sorry. For making you feel lonely."

"Why are you apologizing, Amane-kun? I let myself in here without asking and decided to wait for you, that's all. And I had that dream all on my own."

"I didn't tell you that I was going out, even though I knew there was a chance you would come by my place. You waited so long that you fell asleep, right? I'm sure you got tired of waiting."

After he said that, Amane lowered his eyes for a moment, then looked directly at Mahiru.

"…I see you for who you are, and I'll always come home to you, Mahiru."

His voice wasn't loud, but it was very powerful and sincere.

Under his honest, heartfelt gaze, Mahiru felt her eyes start to fill with tears, but she held them back and slowly put on a smile.

—That must be why I fell in love with this person.

He was a little guarded, but he was gentle and compassionate and always looked directly at Mahiru. He accepted every part of her, from her glossy exterior to her vulnerable inner self. He truly cherished her.

How could I help falling in love with someone like this? Seems impossible.

"…Those words sound an awful lot like a proposal, you know?" she said softly in an attempt to distract him from the fact that she was about to cry.

"P-p-pro—?! That's not what I meant at all!"

Once Amane realized that his words could be taken that way, his face flushed red faster than an instant water heater, and he waved his hand in front of him.

It stung a bit to hear him deny it so strongly, but she knew that Amane hadn't meant that when he said it, so she swallowed the pain immediately.

"I know that; it was a joke… But it sounds like I've become something for you to come home to, Amane-kun?"

"…And for you, Mahiru, it seems like my house is where you like to come."

Maybe he'd thought she was teasing him, because his voice turned quite sulky, but she thought it was sweet and cracked a smile, blushing at Amane's words.

Sure enough, Mahiru now almost always went "home" to Amane's place.

Whenever she was alone in her own apartment, that was when she felt really lonely.

Even though she had thought that she was used to it, she had started feeling the loneliness again after meeting Amane—or perhaps thanks to meeting him.

If she had to say, she guessed it was the latter.

Mahiru had met Amane and felt fulfilled for the first time.

She had learned the joy of having a conversation with someone on an equal footing. She had learned the warmth of having someone beside her. She had learned the pleasure of spending quiet time together. She had learned the true meaning of loving someone.

By spending time with Amane, her hollow interior had become packed full with these things before she knew it.

"That's right, because I already know my way around your place just like it was my own home."

"You seem to know it better than I do."

"That's because you're always forgetting where things are."

"Oh, hush."

She poked fun at him to hide her own embarrassment, and Amane turned away.

She said he had trouble remembering, but she knew that was because he had been making adjustments for her sake. Amane had moved the things she used into places where she could reach them easily and out of the spots where he normally kept them.

Previously, even daily-use items had been stored up high, and now they had been moved, one by one, into spots that were convenient for Mahiru, since she wasn't all that tall.

On top of all that, Amane had prepared spots for Mahiru to leave her personal items. From her blanket and toothbrush, to her grooming tools, to dishes, and even a complete set of study materials…her personal effects had rapidly multiplied.

Bit by bit, ever since they met, this apartment had been changing to accommodate Mahiru.

As if Amane was trying to say *You can be here; this is where you belong*.

"…I'd rather—"

"Rather what?"

"…Nothing."

If only I could stay here by your side forever.

But the words wouldn't come out.

They weren't that close yet, and she knew Amane would have no idea how to react if she said something like that. Even clingy girls have their limits.

But that was how much trust and affection she had for Amane.

How happy she would be if they could live a peaceful, warm life together.

"…I'm a greedy person, you know."

"I don't know what kind of criteria you're using, Mahiru, but if you're greedy, then I'm in trouble because I must be absolutely insatiable."

"That's a joke, right? You almost never ask for anything from anyone. If anything, you're quite reserved and very considerate of other people's needs."

"Not at all! Just now, I was worrying over making a request of you."

"Oh-ho, a request for what?"

He approached the request with such gentleness that she decided to grant whatever it was, even if it took a little work. If he desired something from Mahiru, she wanted to give it to him.

When she looked at Amane to see what he wanted, his eyes were darting around as though he was finding the request hard to articulate, but he steeled himself, and his black eyes focused firmly on Mahiru.

"If you're having a hard time, lean on me."

His firm request wasn't exactly a desire, nor was it an ordinary suggestion.

But she understood what Amane was thinking and why he had said those words. *How lucky I am*, she thought as her face twisted into a smile. It wasn't elegant, but it was her genuine, heartfelt smile.

"…Well then, will you indulge me?" she asked.

"Sure, ask away. Anything you want, as long as I can do it," Amane said with a composed expression on his face.

Mahiru wavered for a moment…then informed him, "In that case, I won't hold back," before tipping over to lay her head on Amane's lap where he sat beside her.

Looking up at the ceiling, she could see Amane, who had stiffened, probably because she had caught him by surprise. She ignored her own feelings of embarrassment and laughed.

"…Mahiru?"

"This seemed to soothe you before when you did it, so I thought maybe it could soothe me, too. I wanted to try it once."

"Is lying in a guy's lap all that soothing?"

"Well, it wouldn't be very comfortable for a nap."

"Sorry."

"But it is nice and cozy."

"…If you say so."

As she probably could have expected, his muscular male thighs were a bit hard for a pillow, but she felt strongly connected with Amane, and his warmth and characteristic smell seeped over her, dissolving her quiet tension.

Amane was the only person she wanted to touch her and spoil her like that.

"…Could I stay like this, just for a little while?"

"As you wish, my lady."

She grew worried that her actions had indeed been reckless, and when she looked up, Amane's face was flushed slightly red, but he didn't look uncomfortable. With awkward but courteous hand movements, he started stroking her head.

His hands were the ones that grabbed her tightly and pulled her back when she was in danger of going astray; they were the hands that embraced her when things were hard and she wanted to cry, the hands that stroked her to soothe and to spoil.

Under the touch of those firm hands, she became very relaxed, and their pleasant touch caused her mouth to soften into a smile.

"…Amane-kun?"

"Hmm?"

"…Thank you very much."

"For what?"

Amane looked away, as if he didn't want to admit he had been worried about her, so Mahiru pretended not to see that Amane was blushing. She turned over to face away from him, so as not to expose the fact that her own face was turning red with embarrassment.

A Careless Angel

Mahiru's behavior was very different around people she was close to compared with how she was around strangers.

Only people who knew her well could see that.

She wasn't cold to people that she didn't know very well, and in fact she treated most everyone amicably and politely. But although she was friendly on the surface, underneath she was highly cautious and never showed the slightest opening to anyone. It was as though she erected a wall so that no one could get close to her and learn the truth.

On the other hand, once she opened up to someone, she became extremely generous toward them, fawning over them and availing herself of their kindness. That was the Mahiru that people got to know once they became close to her.

Basically, she was never on guard around her friends, and she showed them her sweet side once she trusted them. It made her vulnerable, in a way that some people would describe as careless.

For example, once Mahiru got used to someone, she had no problem getting physically close to them.

"…This model is about the same height as you, Amane-kun, so it's easy to imagine what you would look like in these clothes, isn't it?"

When she had first been getting to know Amane, she had left space between them on the sofa as a matter of course. It would have been unthinkable to sit so close that they could touch.

So much for that.

Now Mahiru took a seat beside Amane where he sat on the sofa and seemed truly relaxed as she peeked over at the fashion magazine that he was reading.

She almost melted into him, as if she didn't have the slightest concern that he might do anything.

This brought with it a host of problems.

Amane was holding an ordinary fashion magazine, so there wasn't any particular problem with her reading it. But since they were looking at the magazine together, it was inevitable that she would bring her body close to his and lean against his arm.

He knew that she wasn't doing it on purpose, but from time to time, something soft and squishy would assert itself against his arm and make things difficult.

Its owner didn't seem to have the slightest idea that it was touching him, as she looked up at him bashfully and pointed at the male model, saying, "I bet these clothes would look good on you, Amane-kun."

He found himself having to bite sharply down on the inside of his cheek to bear it each time.

Even though he didn't consider himself to be someone with overly strong desires in that department, the situation was shaving away at his willpower.

...I wish she would be a little more vigilant about certain things.

Even if Mahiru was more self-aware, Amane knew that she wouldn't treat him with suspicion, but still, he wondered if she couldn't stand to be just a little more guarded.

The way she didn't worry about him at all made him wonder if she even saw him as a man.

"…Amane-kun, there's obviously something on your mind. Is something the matter?"

Mahiru tilted her head in puzzlement, not the least bit aware that she herself was the cause of his vexation, so Amane caught himself before he could say, "*Whose fault do you think that is…?*" and tried to evade the question.

"It's nothing, really," he answered.

His voice was especially curt, even for him. By the time he realized it, Mahiru had cast her eyes downward dejectedly.

"W-wait, I'm not mad or anything!" He stroked her head in a panic, rushing to soothe her. "I was just thinking about something…"

"…Are you sure?"

He reassured her as he gently stroked her head, and the look in Mahiru's eyes softened in relief. Amane also felt relieved as he enjoyed the softness of her hair, running his hands through it carefully.

He had only realized it recently, but Mahiru seemed to like having her head stroked.

Really, he knew that it wasn't appropriate for him to thoughtlessly lay hands on a girl he wasn't actually dating and that girls didn't like it when boys they weren't attracted to touched their hair. But Mahiru always seemed quite pleased by it and showed no resistance, so against his better judgment, he allowed himself to touch her.

He figured it was a good thing, since she would have stopped him if she disliked it.

He also knew that she let her guard down because she trusted him.

…She really lets me get away with a lot.

Mahiru was always naive around Amane, and she never stopped him from touching her.

In fact, she seemed delighted by physical contact with him and sometimes practically encouraged him to touch her.

If she's not a little more cautious, I might just lose control.

He had a feeling he might come on too strong one day if she kept being so careless. Of course, he didn't want to force himself on her or make her hate him, and that logic always won out, but he felt that his willpower was gradually being worn away, and he feared the day when he would give himself over to his urges might be coming.

Even though he didn't want to hurt her, Amane worried that his male instincts might overwhelm the warnings from his rational mind and he might find himself grabbing at her.

He wanted to cherish her and to keep her happy. Making her cry was out of the question.

Even though he understood that, from time to time, the impulse to take hold of Mahiru reared its ugly head. To embrace her soft body, and run his hands over her smooth skin, and taste her little lips to his heart's content.

Many times, he had wallowed in self-loathing for succumbing to ridiculous fantasies. Every time, he scolded and scorned himself for his rudeness and his betrayal of Mahiru's trust in him.

Rightfully, it should have been Amane maintaining the distance between them so that nothing like that could possibly happen, but—

"…It's impossible, at this point."

"What is?"

Mahiru asked him a question in return, still wearing a soft, buoyant expression.

Amane averted his eyes a little and replied, "Nothing."

He loved Mahiru far too much now to ever think of parting from her, so he pretended not to hear the faint alarm bells ringing in his head and stroked Mahiru's hair again.

Only Bad Kids Stay Up All Night

"The best time to see the Lyrids meteor shower would be sometime starting late tonight, and it should continue into tomorrow morning—"

The news came from the television, which they sometimes left on during dinner, and Amane swallowed the food he was chewing and made an interested sound. "Oh?"

Amane had never been the type to watch much television, and if he did have the television on, he was either playing a game, watching some variety show, or viewing a news program that succinctly reported on the events of the day.

Since he tended to get most of his news from browsing social media sites, which were the noisiest places on the web, he hadn't heard about the meteors until that day.

"A meteor shower?"

"People have been talking about it for a while—," Mahiru replied, giving Amane a look of subtle exasperation.

He sipped his miso soup with a look of feigned ignorance on his face. *Delicious today as always*, he thought earnestly, and looked up at Mahiru. Sure enough, that look of slight exasperation was still trained on him.

He just sighed quietly, as if he didn't intend to say anything more on the matter.

"Anyway," Mahiru explained, "this one doesn't have quite as many meteors, compared to the other meteor showers in the big three, but since the weather will be pretty good and it will be easy to watch outside, the members of the astronomy club are apparently having a meteor shower observation party as a club activity."

"Come to think of it, I feel like I might have heard the astronomy club members in our class talking about something like that."

It wasn't really polite to eavesdrop on other people's conversations, and anyway the classmates he wasn't friendly with were basically strangers. Amane didn't

have any interest in what they were saying, so even when he did overhear something, he let it wash right over him like white noise.

As a result, he lost many opportunities to find common ground with other people. This was something about himself that he recognized was not good. He didn't have much inclination to fix it, though.

"Amane-kun, you tend to ignore anything that doesn't concern you, don't you? When you're talking to someone, and they bring up something that's on their mind, that's an opportunity to make a real connection. So if you pay a little more attention, things will be easier for you in the future."

"I'm just not that interested in other people. I'm perfectly happy with just you, Itsuki, Chitose, and Kadowaki."

If the meteor had been something Mahiru, Itsuki, or even Chitose had mentioned, he probably would have remembered every detail, but predictably, when it came to people he didn't know, he only barely listened to their conversation and then promptly forgot it.

"Well, if nothing else, that's very like you."

"I just don't want to get that involved with strangers, I guess. I'm not the type to make lots of friends. I'm happy with fewer, deeper friendships."

"That's because your circle of friends is small, Amane-kun. Mine is wide and shallow, with an oceanic trench in the very center."

"Oceanic trench?"

"It means that the people I develop deep relationships with are special."

Mahiru gave him a slightly impish smile, and Amane wondered whether he made the cut as one of those special people, but he couldn't bring himself to ask.

If it wasn't so conceited, he would assume he occupied pretty much the most intimate position at the center of Mahiru's circle of friends. He was unsure whether he was the one who was closest to her, but she did let her guard down around him and spoiled him from time to time, so he figured he made the cut as one of those special people.

Thinking about it made him kind of embarrassed, so he took another sip of miso soup to try to hide it.

Information about the best place and time to observe the meteors was coming from the television.

According to the TV, the region where Amane and Mahiru lived was part of the best viewing area. Weather-wise, it was predicted there wouldn't be a cloud in the sky, so conditions for observing the meteor shower were likely to be ideal.

They were set up for such favorable conditions that Amane too started thinking that it might be nice to observe the event, at least for a little while.

"It might be interesting to watch the shooting stars now and then, huh?"

"Heh-heh, it *is* a rare opportunity. The weather has a funny tendency to be bad on the days of the biggest meteor showers."

"I suppose there's never a guarantee that it'll be clear skies just because there's a meteor shower."

"That's right. Which is why tonight is perfect."

"…But it's late, huh? I don't care about being sleepy today, but I'm afraid of how it might hit me tomorrow. We don't have gym class tomorrow, so I might be able to get by just staring out the window, but…"

Naturally, staying up all night the day before they had gym class, especially long distance running, would result in a rough time and Amane would have never considered taking on such obvious hardship. But if it was just a normal day in the classroom, staying up until two or three in the morning didn't seem too bad.

He had always been the type of person who was fine with less sleep. It wasn't as if he always went to sleep late, but he had no problem staying up a little for a chance like this one.

If possible, he would have liked to observe from a wide-open place like the park, but it was dangerous to go out walking at night, and if something happened, they might even be detained by the police, so they would have to enjoy the meteor shower from home. Out on the balcony would be best.

Even so, they wouldn't have any difficulty observing the night sky, so that was the plan.

With that decided, Amane started thinking about the tasks ahead of them that they needed to get through to finish their schoolwork and complete their daily routines, when Mahiru made an uneasy, anxious expression.

"…Is something the matter?"

"No, I want to see the meteors, too, but…I was thinking about what to do."

"Because staying up late is the enemy of healthy skin?"

She kept a consistent routine and was more serious about her appearance than most people. Basic skin care dictates that the skin is restored during sleep, so Mahiru never failed to get enough rest.

"Well, there's that too, but…um, isn't it preferable to observe meteor showers in places where there's no light around?"

"Well yeah, that's true."

Everyone had heard before that the starry night sky looked more beautiful in the countryside than in the city.

Because of air pollution—and, more importantly, the light pollution in the city—it was easier to make out the twinkling of the stars away from the dense population centers.

Illuminating the black of night was a normal sign of human activity. But that artificial brilliance obstructed the natural light that celestial bodies gave off as they burned their lives away.

It made sense that if there were artificial lights nearby, to the human eye, the brilliance of the stars would seem diminished.

"…I, um, you'll probably think this is childish, but I can't really handle being alone in the pitch-dark."

Mahiru chose her words carefully and mumbled them with some hesitation before putting on an anxious smile.

"I'm fine when I'm sleeping, but…well, just sitting there waiting, not so much. There's a buzz in my chest, like I can't calm down, so—"

Mahiru cast her eyes downward a little and trailed off, her voice becoming gradually quieter. Then she must have noticed that Amane was staring at her, because she rushed to raise her head and put on a courageous smile.

It was obvious to Amane, who had been spending a lot of time with her, that Mahiru was bluffing.

"After all, the official account for the observatory puts their broadcast archive up on video sites, so maybe I'll just watch that."

"…You don't want to be alone?"

"Well, it's… I'll get lonely, is all."

She didn't use the word *afraid*, but she looked as if she was kind of frightened and was trying not to show it.

Even Amane wasn't complacent enough to ignore it when he saw her in that state.

"…Want to come watch it here?"

"Ah—"

"I'm planning to stay up tonight, so if you want to come to my place and watch it together, I really don't mind."

They were both staying up for the same purpose, so he saw no issue with watching the meteor shower together. And they were always hanging out at his place anyway, and spending time alone together, so it was probably no big deal, he thought,

as his gaze slid over to Mahiru, but—Mahiru's eyes disappeared and reappeared behind the curtain of her eyelashes several times as she blinked in obvious surprise.

Amane wondered why she would be so surprised, then in the next moment, he realized what was wrong, and a gasp escaped his mouth.

It's obvious that a boy and a girl being alone together in the middle of the night is no good, isn't it?!

It had become so natural to have Mahiru around that he had made the suggestion even though common sense dictated that it wasn't a good idea for two people of the opposite sex who weren't in a serious relationship to be spending time together late at night like that.

Obviously Amane had no bad intentions, but it was still true that he had said something that sounded suspicious, depending on how she took it.

Of course Mahiru would be shocked.

"W-wait, I don't mean anything shameful by that, okay?! It's, I just… I thought that maybe you could stay up to watch the meteors if you had somebody with you, and that maybe we could watch them together, that's all."

"…Would it be okay for me to be here?"

She looked at him, wide-eyed with hope, and yet when she said that, Amane was the one who felt a sense of impending danger.

"Uh, th-that's my line… You're supposed to think it's dangerous."

"If you were really a dangerous person, you wouldn't warn me beforehand."

"…That may be true, but you should still be careful."

"I am being careful!"

Even though he thought she was definitely lying, the most important thing to Amane was that Mahiru's expression had brightened. Somehow or other, the bad thoughts had been washed out of her mind, and that had to be a good thing.

For Amane's part, he was the one who had invited her, and he had no intention of doing anything, so as long as he could keep ahold of himself, there should be no problem. That was what he decided.

"…So um, after we eat dinner, I'll just…go home for a bit. And come back after I'm done having my bath and changing clothes and stuff, so…"

"S-sure. I'll go ahead and get ready for bed, too."

It seemed that in Mahiru's mind, the fact that she was coming over was settled.

She seemed relieved, and a soft smile spread over her face, revealing a sense of security and feelings of happiness. Amane let his eyes start to drift around the room.

“I’m looking forward to it, to the shooting stars,” she said in a tone of voice that was sweet and a little lively.

“Me too,” Amane managed to answer, before taking another sip of his rapidly disappearing miso soup to hide his embarrassment again.

“I’m coming in.”

Just as she’d said she would, Mahiru went home once, then returned timidly to Amane’s place before midnight.

Typical Mahiru, she must have understood that it would be a big issue for her to come in her nightclothes, because she was dressed in casual clothing instead. Her hair was in a single loose braid, and she was wearing a flowy cream-colored dress.

Amane was sure she wouldn’t have dared, but he’d nevertheless prepared himself to make an about-face if she had shown up in her nightclothes. He was relieved that wasn’t the case, but even so, she did look somehow different than usual, which he chalked up to the fact that it was an unusual time of night for her to be there.

He got flustered just going to the door to greet her and was worried she might think he was acting strange. But whether or not Mahiru noticed Amane’s agitation, she just put on a gentle smile.

“…Um, the meteor shower is going to reach its peak quite late at night, so I’m sure it’s going to be hard to stay up until then… You’ll be here for several hours. Is that all right?”

“Yep. Thanks for having me.”

Mahiru bowed her head politely and followed right behind Amane as he invited her in. Together they went into the living room.

Amane had gone ahead and moved the low table to make space by the window, so that observation would be easier, and had laid out Mahiru’s favorite cushions.

He had considered dragging the beanbag that she loved so much out from his bedroom, but if they weren’t careful, sinking down into the beanbag could mean falling asleep and defeating the whole purpose of the evening, so he had decided not to bring it out.

He had also readied a small blanket for a lap warmer, but Mahiru was somewhat lightly dressed, so he draped a large sweatshirt that he had also laid out over her shoulders, then sat down beside her.

“You thought of everything, didn’t you?”

“…Normally, you’re the one who does that, so I thought that at least for something like this, I should make sure that everything was ready.”

Smirking at her lack of confidence in his preparations, Amane turned the lights down with a remote control, and Mahiru shivered slightly.

"Sorry, I should have said something before I turned the lights off, huh?"

"No…I was just a little startled, it's fine."

As she said that, Amane decided it was best not to point out that her fingertips were grasping lightly at the hem of his sweatshirt.

Without saying a word, Amane scooted just a little bit closer to Mahiru, trying to do it in a way that seemed natural, and then quietly turned his gaze out the window.

He wasn't normally aware of it, but when he looked up at the sky again, he noticed its marvelous hues—a little bit of blue and purple mixed into almost-black navy blue, clear yet mysteriously impenetrable.

It was a peaceful color, which seemed to set off the sparkle of the inlaid stars all the more.

The sky looked more beautiful than usual that night, and the small specks of light adorning it seemed to twinkle more intensely.

"So beautiful," Amane mouthed noiselessly. He glanced sidelong at Mahiru and saw her looking silently at the sky beyond the window.

The moonlight illuminated her, tracing the contours of her graceful silhouette.

Her long eyelashes seemed to glow slightly in the faint light, but it might have been his imagination, a trick Amane's eyes were playing on him as he looked at the girl he loved.

The only thing he knew for sure was that the Mahiru sitting beside him was somehow different than usual. She looked ethereal, almost diaphanous, and she emanated a bewitching charm.

"…It's so pretty. I haven't spotted any shooting stars yet, but even just like this, I think it's a perfectly wonderful sight."

She seemed to notice him looking at her and turned to face Amane with a faint smile. That was the exact moment Amane realized that he had forgotten himself for a second. He nodded, flustered. "It sure is. I've never sat quietly and looked up at the stars in the middle of the night like this before, so it's a wonderfully novel experience."

"Settling in to watch the stars seems so simple, but it's something we almost never do in modern society, where life is so rushed."

"You're right. And it's too bad that it's kind of hard to see the stars from here. If we were at my parents' house, we could spread a tarp out in the yard and lie down to watch. The stars would be easier to see than they are here."

Amane's parents' house was located in an area with less traffic and fewer artificial lights, so the stars were clearly visible.

Their garden was also fairly large and well-maintained, so it would have been possible to spread out a tarp and observe the sky. Amane recalled lying out there with his parents to stargaze when he was small, though never for a meteor shower, and he smiled slightly at the nostalgic memory.

"Oh yes, I can only imagine; that would be wonderful."

"Well, it's out in the countryside, not like this place. The landscape around it is beautiful, too."

"How nice. Growing up, I lived in the penthouse of a condo building, so the night sky did look pretty from there, but…I'm sure it must be much prettier seeing it from your house, Amane-kun."

Amane had no idea how to respond to that. Mahiru chuckled quietly and calmly shifted her gaze back out the window.

There was a look in her eyes as if she was gazing at some place far, far away.

"Now the stars look so much prettier than they used to."

"…Oh?"

After somehow managing that little answer, Amane said nothing further and looked up at the sky just as Mahiru was doing.

He thought about suggesting they go out on the balcony, but he didn't want to move now that Mahiru was by his side, so he just quietly gazed up at the starry sky.

The sky, full of glittering ancient lights just now reaching the Earth, told Amane and Mahiru nothing. It just twinkled faintly, illuminating the dark, peaceful night.

Silence, heavy with a curious yet pleasant feeling of tension, filled the room.

The only thing audible was the sound of their breathing and the rustling of their clothes. Somewhere far away, a car alarm briefly sounded.

Neither of them knew how much time passed as they sat there like that.

Mahiru let out a little gasp in a childish voice, not quite managing to say an actual word.

When Amane reflexively looked over at her, he saw her gaze gliding across the sky, her clear eyes seeming to chase after something.

He stared, engrossed, at her face and eyes, sparkling as beautifully as any star—then a moment too late, he realized that she had found a shooting star.

Amane hurriedly turned toward the window, but the life span of a meteor is short, and it had already burned out.

Chiding himself for missing it, he contented himself with the thought that he had seen something even more beautiful.

"…Did you wish for something?"

"Don't you think it has a better chance of coming true if I don't tell you?"

"Is that how it works?"

"In any case, what I wished for just then was…less of a wish, more like a prayer, or an oath, so…"

So it's a secret.

Mahiru looked bashful for a moment, then stared straight at Amane.

"So then what did you wish for, Amane-kun?"

"Uh…well, I, nothing really."

There was no way he could tell Mahiru he had been distracted looking at her, so he tried to avoid the question with a vague answer, but apparently his scheme was transparent.

"You weren't really watching, were you?" Mahiru smiled knowingly.

"Uh…I'll get a good look at the next one."

"He-he, make sure you do."

Mahiru laughed with her hand covering her mouth, then turned her gaze out the window again.

Amane was intently watching the sky so that Mahiru wouldn't have a reason to tease him again, when he noticed her shivering.

Though it was spring, the night was chilly, so they had the heater on. But Amane's sense of cold and Mahiru's were different. Mahiru always had a lower body temperature, so she probably wasn't warm enough with just a sweatshirt and a blanket.

Amane peered stealthily at Mahiru's face, worried that he had been insufficiently prepared after all, and he must have startled her, because her eyes widened.

"…Aren't you cold?" Amane asked.

"No. You lent me your jacket, so I'm fine… It's big and warm."

"…That's good."

Mahiru had put her arms through the sleeves of the sweatshirt, and she smiled sweetly, which made Amane feel awkward. He bit his tongue to keep his cheeks from melting into a smile.

The sweatshirt was hopelessly baggy on Mahiru.

Amane didn't know if it was just him or if this was true for other boys, too, but he liked it when she was dressed like that, in a way that made the differences in their physique really stand out. The sight made him quite embarrassed.

It was also adorable how her fingers just poked out of the sleeves and were holding on to the hem of Amane's shirt. Filled with unspeakable joy and awkwardness, Amane started to get to his feet.

"…Um, I'm gonna go make us some hot drinks; you can stay there."

"Ah…"

But a small noise and slight resistance from Mahiru kept Amane firmly planted on the floor.

Mahiru's hand, which had been clinging to his hem until a moment earlier, now clasped Amane's hand, holding on to him as if to tell him not to go.

Her delicate fingers were quite chilly, which confirmed to him that she was colder than usual, and he saw her shiver again, in a way that didn't seem to be the fault of the cold.

"S-sorry for stopping you."

"…No, it's fine… Your hands are pretty chilly, Mahiru."

When Amane stiffened, those delicate fingertips tried to pull away in a panic, so Amane dared to wrap her hands in his own and squeeze back.

As soon as he did that, she looked relieved, so he surmised that she was afraid to be left alone, although she didn't say as much.

Mahiru squeezed him back gently, as if she was depending on him, and she must have been embarrassed, too, because she lowered her eyes slightly. But she didn't seem ready to let Amane go.

"It's just that your hands are warm, Amane-kun. You're always so warm, it feels nice to have you beside me."

"…Oh, really?"

He didn't know exactly what she meant by that, and he didn't ask, but he did understand that she liked him, at least.

In that moment, that alone was plenty for Amane.

Gently holding his hand, Mahiru glanced over at the clock.

She squinted to check the time and saw that almost two hours had passed since she had come over to observe the meteors.

"This is the first time I've ever intentionally stayed up this late at night. Normally, I'm only still awake at this time when I'm having trouble sleeping. What a bad kid I'm being!"

“It’s good to be a bad kid from time to time. I’m being bad with you, too.”

“…He-he, I wonder if it’s okay for me to be bad, though.”

“I’m sure everyone is good sometimes and bad sometimes. We’re only human, so we don’t have to do everything perfectly all the time. It’s totally fine for us to be bad kids, just for tonight. You and I are the only ones here, so no one’s going to criticize or complain.”

Amane smiled and said there was no issue as long as they kept it a secret, which made Mahiru smile, too.

Her smile revealed relief and a feeling of happiness, as if she had been rescued from something, and Mahiru squeezed Amane’s hand again, then leaned in close to him.

He stiffened for a moment but didn’t move away and kept his cool. Mahiru softly brought her face close to Amane’s ear.

“…Can I be a little bit naughtier?”

“Sure. What do you want?”

“…I’m hungry. Let’s have a midnight snack.”

She made the suggestion in a quiet, slightly guilty-sounding voice, as if she really thought that was a naughty thing to do.

It seemed to take courage for her to ask for such a trivial thing, which she apparently thought was really bad.

In response to this extremely adorable request, Amane nodded with a gentle smile.

“Absolutely. Let’s be bad together.”

Eating instant ramen with heaps of toppings in the middle of the night seemed like just the right amount of naughtiness.

Wearing an easy smile, Amane stood up again.

This time he was still holding Mahiru’s hand.

“I think we have some seasoned eggs in the fridge, and some braised pork and cheese, too. Since we’re doing this, let’s go all out.”

“…Seems like it’ll be bad for our stomachs to eat all that in the middle of the night.”

“We’re being bad, so there’s no helping it,” Amane replied jokingly, and Mahiru put on a cheerful, excited smile.

Grinning at each other, the two of them headed for the kitchen.

Their clasped hands weren’t shivering anymore.

A Secret Decision, and Sentimentality

“So are you okay with this, Yuuta?”

Yuuta, Itsuki, and Amane were on their way home after hanging out together during Golden Week.

They were going different directions, so Amane’s friends had walked him as far as the station to see him off. Then Itsuki, who had been quiet until then, asked Yuuta that question in a hushed voice.

“Okay with what?”

Yuuta knew what the inquiry meant without asking, but he purposely pretended not to understand as his mouth curled upward into a smile.

Itsuki glanced at Yuuta with a little bit of pity, then let out one small sigh and replied: “The thing about Shiina-san, of course.”

He sounded as if it was an obvious question and yet seemed somewhat hesitant to string the words together. Yuuta also reacted as if the answer was obvious.

Yuuta had never told Itsuki anything about it directly; in fact, he hadn’t even said anything to his two best friends, Kazuya and Makoto. He expected Makoto had more or less figured it out, but that was all.

Apparently, Itsuki had seen through to the secret feelings he had been trying to hide.

Yuuta was aware that he was the type of person who attracted a lot of attention, so he had been especially careful to keep things under wraps, but Itsuki seemed to know exactly what Yuuta had been hiding and was looking at him with concern.

At times like this, it’s a nuisance that he’s so clever, Yuuta thought with a bitter smile as he met Itsuki’s probing gaze directly.

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to answer that. I never meant to say anything to begin with, and Fujimiya also doesn’t seem inclined to tell Shiina-san anything.”

“…You weren’t holding back or anything?”

"No, no. I was planning to keep my feelings to myself from the start. Fujimiya's got nothing to do with it, and now that we're friends, I'm even less inclined to say anything. Believe me, I'm not holding back on his account." Yuuta preemptively reassured his concerned friend.

He was trying not to give Itsuki any more funny ideas. Yuuta laughed cheerfully…while hoping that it wouldn't sound hollow to Itsuki.

"…Anyway, I knew there was no hope right from the beginning. I would never dream of getting in between the two of them, or trying to get in the way. And a date…she doesn't want to date me, but if we did happen to go out, I imagine I'd see there was no chance of success the moment I looked at Shiina-san's face. I wouldn't dare meddle because nothing good would come of it."

She didn't act like it at all in school, but when he had met Mahiru before, the way she had looked at Amane had unmistakably been the look of a girl in love.

She had smiled at Amane—not with her usual fleeting, gorgeous, angelic smile but with a sweet smile that held shades of emotion and passion.

Right before his eyes, the expression on her face and the look in her eyes had made it clear that she was head over heels for Amane and that there was nothing anyone could do about that.

Seeing that was enough to convince Yuuta that there was simply no hope.

He found it puzzling how Amane didn't seem to notice the way she looked at him, but even though Yuuta hadn't known him for that long, he could tell that Amane was extremely cautious—cowardly, to put it unkindly—and he figured that Amane would find it difficult to believe that she liked him.

Well, I can see how it would be difficult to believe, since he's not used to being the object of affection for a perfect beauty like Shiina-san.

Nevertheless, the fact that Amane still didn't have any confidence, despite the way that Mahiru looked at him with such love, pointed to seriously low self-esteem.

"Do you resent Amane?" Itsuki asked.

"Are you worried I would?"

"I don't think so, based on your personality, but just in case…or more like, just to be sure? I wanna check that you're really okay with it. I'm Amane's friend, but I'm your friend, too, Yuuta. I guess I don't want either of you to end up unhappy."

When it came to the relationship between Amane and Mahiru, Itsuki was decisively in favor of their romance. Yuuta knew that, so he was surprised to hear Itsuki's words, and he blinked dramatically several times in spite of himself.

Apparently, Itsuki was concerned about him, too. As he felt the depths of his chest gradually growing warmer, Yuuta shrugged.

"You don't have to worry; I don't want to cause trouble, and I'm not going to intrude. I know you're not too dull to understand that."

Even if he hadn't been friends with Amane, he wasn't the sort of reckless person who, having seen how the two of them acted, would still try to butt in.

It was precisely because Itsuki was in the difficult position of being close friends with both Yuuta and Amane that he was reading too much into things, Yuuta thought. He felt a little bad for him.

Yuuta smiled once more as Itsuki gave him an anxious-looking gaze.

"I'm not as hurt as you think, Itsuki. How can I put this? My feelings toward Shiina-san were…more like admiration, I guess. Nothing serious."

It was true that he liked Mahiru, but if anyone asked him if his passion was strong enough to make him burn with love, he would have said no.

A love that he could keep from showing on his face, that he could bury away in the depths of his heart, that he could keep away from the surface, was a shallow, benign thing.

"It's not exactly that I'm withdrawing out of concern for Fujimiya, it's more…I probably…if you asked me whether I was serious about her, the answer is probably no. It's not really love that I feel for her, more like empathy and adoration."

"Empathy?"

It must have been an unexpected word, because Itsuki blinked in surprise. Yuuta shot him a wry smile.

"Well, I always thought of Shiina-san as being cut from the same cloth as I am. The type of person who's fed up with the opposite sex. Happy to be admired but, on the other hand, suffering under the weight of inertia. It's too late to change the face she wears in front of other people, so she suffocates under the smiling mask, that type… Shiina-san is the same as me, but she handles it better than I do. I admired the way she could conceal everything and smile as if she wasn't in any pain."

Yuuta knew that, objectively speaking, he was considered better looking than most people and that he had many talents worth boasting about. He also understood that this made him very attractive to many of the opposite sex.

But all that attention was focused on his appearance and abilities, and he was fully aware that he was looked upon as a kind of idol.

For that very reason, he couldn't feel any affection toward the girls who desired him as an object. Their interest seemed shallow.

So when he first saw Mahiru, who was in the same position he was in, she'd piqued his interest. And he was impressed by how she acted as if she didn't struggle with hardship at all.

He had admired her, standing bravely on her own.

But ultimately, seeing her like that was still a way of forcing an image onto her. Yuuta was projecting the very feelings he couldn't stand onto Mahiru.

But with Amane, the sublime Mahiru smiled like an ordinary girl. She wasn't the perfect beauty, the angel who never let anyone near her, but just an everyday girl in love.

And Amane treated her like a normal person.

Now that Mahiru had found a partner who treasured her for who she really was, Yuuta couldn't even look straight at her anymore.

"In my personal view, when I saw them together, that was when I understood that the flower on a high peak blooming in dignified solitude, that Shiina-san, was…it sounds bad to say it this way, but she's just an ordinary girl. I saw that she had found someone who really loved her and that she only had eyes for him, which made me want to cheer them on more than cut in. I want her to find happiness."

If Mahiru had finally found someone who really understood her, there was no way that Yuuta, who was in a sense in the same position as she was in, could stand against them.

"You waste your good looks by being so nice, you know?"

"What have my looks got to do with this? Or are you just complimenting me?"

"It's a compliment, really. Just a compliment."

"I wonder…"

Itsuki cracked a teasing smile, and Yuuta smiled weakly back.

"Well, whatever, it's fine… And anyway, let me make it clear that I don't hold a grudge against Fujimiya or anything. He's a good guy; it's too bad not everyone knows that."

Amane was the kind of person who didn't really stand out in class, but Yuuta saw him for the gentle, kind, and sensible person that he was.

Amane was often short with Itsuki, but that was just superficial—one of their ways of joking around. In reality, he was a compassionate person, a sensitive guy who paid attention to others and considered their needs.

His obvious weak point was that he didn't have much confidence in himself, but his great merit was that although he seemed cold, he actually had a warm demeanor and was incredibly considerate of others.

If the angel, who only ever wore a beautiful smile in school and absolutely never let anyone see her true feelings, placed that much trust in him, then the quality of his character was guaranteed.

Amane also loved Mahiru, and he showed her affection without going overboard. It was abundantly clear that he saw Mahiru for who she really was. And the look in his eyes when he stared at her showed that he cherished and loved her.

Surely, Yuuta couldn't possibly come between two people who were so in love with each other.

"The two of them can't not be together."

Yuuta didn't usually believe in so-called fate, but when he thought about the two of them and how perfectly they went together, he really believed that they were somehow supposed to be together.

That was how close they were and how well they complemented each other.

"This is probably a bad way of putting this, but I think I'll probably be fine without Shiina-san. It's not like I absolutely can't live without her. Knowing that, it would be rude for me to go snatch her away, and she probably wouldn't even be interested."

"…Really?"

"So instead of loss, or jealousy…I'm feeling more impatient than anything else. I want her to hurry up and be happy."

He did feel a little lonesome, but his loneliness was overshadowed by his desire for the two of them to find happiness together.

He wanted them to be united, and he wanted them to support each other. He saw in them the makings of a happily married couple, and he couldn't bring himself to be jealous.

When Yuuta asserted that he was genuinely cheering them on, Itsuki smiled at him with an expression that was both awkward and bittersweet.

"You're a good egg, Yuuta."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"I'm not, I'm not. I was just thinking that I'm blessed with a really good circle of friends."

Itsuki smiled poignantly as he ran a hand through his hair, and Yuuta smiled back at him.

The one who was truly blessed by his circle of friends was Yuuta.

Itsuki always paid careful attention like this so that things around him wouldn't go awry, and he was always worrying about his friends. But he never demanded any

gratitude, and he didn’t want to risk hurting anyone, so he never took sides and tried to support everyone.

It made Yuuta think again that he had found himself some valuable friends.

While he was counting his blessings, Yuuta smiled calmly and ignored the warmth that was building behind his eyes and threatening to spill down his chilly cheeks.

“Amane, what have you been doing with Shiina-san when you’re alone together?”

On the way home from school, Amane stopped by a bookstore to buy a study book, and Itsuki, who never seemed to have any interest in such things, suddenly asked him that question in a quiet voice.

It really was sudden, so Amane shot his friend a puzzled look, but he saw that Itsuki was holding a magazine in his hands with a headline written in big letters, “Recommended Ways to Spend Time Together on a Home Date!” so that explained some things.

He’s asked me something similar before. What is he thinking, when we’re not even dating?

Amane was annoyed, but he didn’t have the slightest thing to feel guilty about, so he decided it would seem more suspicious to avoid the question.

With that thought, Amane looked up a little, still holding the study book he needed in his hand, and recalled how he and Mahiru had been spending their time together.

They certainly didn’t spend their time the way Itsuki was probably thinking.

It should have been obvious, but Amane and Mahiru were just close friends at the moment. They regularly ate meals together, but that was it. There was absolutely no romantic involvement.

So there were none of the salacious details that Itsuki seemed to be expecting, no lovers’ embraces to speak of, like boyfriend and girlfriend might do. All he could say was that they usually spent their time together.

“…Even when we’re in the same room, sometimes we’re doing different stuff, or sometimes we do homework or something. At most, we watch TV or read together… That’s about it.”

Both Amane and Mahiru were diligent students—Amane perhaps less so than Mahiru. After they enjoyed whatever Mahiru made for dinner, the two of them usually cleaned up and then completed their homework assignments, reviewed and prepared their study materials, and got ready for the next day's classes. If they had extra time, they relaxed and watched television, or flipped through a comic book or magazine together, or occasionally played a video game. That was about the state of things.

They also frequently sat beside each other doing their own things, as Amane had described.

Mahiru had her lacework and embroidery, which served as a diversion and hobby, and Amane spent his time playing social media games and watching video clips on the internet.

They weren't necessarily always doing something together, and when they were each engaged doing something they liked, neither of them ever really bothered the other.

Amane explained this simply, and Itsuki opened his eyes unnaturally wide, as if he had seen something he couldn't believe, and said in a trembling voice, "Why aren't you making any progress, when you've got the girl you love all to yourself?!"

"Shut up. First of all, I do love her, which is why I'm not forcing anything along."

"Coward!"

"Be quiet! Anyway, if I did anything, I would only be inviting danger."

It was unthinkable, but just supposing that Amane were to act like an animal and pounce on Mahiru, she probably wouldn't hesitate to attack him in the most tender of targets.

He could be sure of that, since she had already told him she would fight back if provoked.

He absolutely believed that he would be crushed, without a doubt.

"Shiina-san would do that?"

"She told me she would, right from the start."

"Huh…"

Itsuki seemed to think that Mahiru was polite and quiet and wouldn't ever do anything violent. But while Amane would agree that she was polite and quiet, she was also a levelheaded person who was alert to the danger around her and would not hesitate to deal with any threats.

Of course, it was only natural that she had the right to protect herself, but Itsuki seemed skeptical.

“Would she really go that far?”

“Well, I don’t want to hurt Mahiru in the first place, and I hate the idea of forcing her to do something she doesn’t want and having her despise me. Why should I make her cry, when I want to cherish her? I don’t want to become the kind of awful guy who just takes what he wants, no matter what.”

Amane would be much worse off if he tried to force his desires on her and she ended up in tears, hating him for it.

Amane wanted to treat Mahiru with kindness and sincerity, so he couldn’t selfishly force his feelings on her. That applied with Mahiru, of course, but also with any other person as well.

“That’s a good quality of yours, but you’re still a coward, man.”

“Oh, shut up… Seriously, it’s fine. I’m having a perfectly good time just spending the day together.”

He wasn’t in a rush to move their relationship to the next level or do whatever Itsuki was thinking about.

Of course, he did want Mahiru to like him back, but he wanted her to take her time and fall for him after she got to know him better. Particularly with Mahiru, he wasn’t just interested in her superficial qualities, so he also wanted her to really get to know him, even if it took time.

After all, he figured she already knew about the sloppy and irresponsible parts of him. So if she still wanted to take the time to get to know him, he wasn’t going to deny her the chance.

Itsuki looked pretty astonished by Amane’s words, but Amane had no intention of changing his opinion, so he ignored the look Itsuki was giving him and carried his study book up to the register.

When Amane got home, he helped Mahiru make dinner as he always did. They ate together, and then it was time to relax and study.

Really, nothing much was different, as Mahiru sat quietly beside Amane, devoting herself to her studies. She was apparently already finished with her homework, so she was going over the material for their upcoming lessons.

It wasn’t an especially romantic situation, the way Itsuki seemed to imagine, and Amane also had his own studies to work on. He was quietly engrossed in the reference book he had purchased earlier that day.

The only sounds were the scratching of their mechanical pencils across paper, the turning of pages, and their breathing, resonating in the silence.

The television was off so they could concentrate, and night had fallen, so the room was a really peaceful space.

Amane had been silently working through the problems in his study book for a while. Feeling his concentration start to waver, he raised his head to take a breather.

As he moved his shoulders gently up and down to loosen his muscles, he happened to glance beside him, where Mahiru was still working away at her study book. Her ramrod-straight posture was lovely and composed—anyone would have thought as much.

Her expression was serious as she wordlessly moved her pencil.

There was an almost dreamlike, bewitching quality to her slightly downturned eyes, and without meaning to, Amane let the pencil he was holding slip from his hand as he stared at Mahiru, utterly absorbed.

"…Is something the matter?"

Mahiru had apparently noticed his gaze, and she twisted her body so that she was facing him. A gentle, slightly discouraged smile drifted across her lips. Amane suddenly felt embarrassed that he had been so captivated by her.

"Ah, n-no, it's nothing."

"…Really?"

"N-no, I just, well, I was thinking, your posture is so nice."

He wasn't lying, so he figured that was all right. He had indeed been impressed by her posture, after all.

Mahiru blinked several times at the mention of her posture.

"Is that so? This is how I normally sit."

"And I think it's amazing that that is your 'normal.' Your back is absolutely straight when we're eating meals, too, which is proof that you always maintain good posture."

"He-he, well, Koyuki-san was very strict about that. She always said that lovely posture and bearing gives other people a favorable impression of you and that if your posture is good, you end up looking straight ahead, and that's naturally connected to having self-confidence."

The idea was persuasive when Mahiru said it with an elegant smile.

Graceful manners were naturally more likable than coarse manners, and people with good posture did seem to have more confidence. Those who seemed confident were probably treated as such and gained more confidence, too.

"You're usually a little hunched over, Amane-kun, so you ought to think about improving your posture and training your back muscles. Here, sit up!"

With a sweet-sounding command, Mahiru reached over to straighten Amane's somewhat curved back. She gently grabbed one of Amane's shoulders, placed her other hand on his back, and corrected his posture.

"Having nice posture is proof that you've trained your body. If your back muscles are weak, your torso will shift around, and you'll have a tendency to hunch. You've been working hard at your training recently, so I may be sticking my nose where it doesn't belong, but as important as exercising your legs is, you should also properly train up the muscles on your back. Consciously improving your posture is also a form of training, you know."

Amane felt a strange chill as Mahiru slowly rubbed his back, which was now straight, while whispering those words close to his ear. "S-sure," he yelped in a shrill voice.

Mahiru let out a soft, easygoing laugh, like the tinkling of a bell.

"You don't have to be so stiff. You can fix your posture just by paying a little bit of attention, okay?"

Amane was slightly relieved to realize that Mahiru had apparently concluded it was the unfamiliar position that was bothering him.

Beside him, satisfied that he would keep his back straight this time, Mahiru moved away a little…and then stared directly at Amane.

"…What?"

"Payback for earlier."

"I see."

Apparently, Mahiru was going to stare at Amane this time, which made it extremely difficult for Amane to do anything.

Maintaining her lovely posture and smiling happily as she looked at him, Mahiru gave off a kind of impish impression.

"…I can't imagine it's all that much fun looking at me."

"You're wrong about that. It is fun."

"What's fun about it?"

"Let me see; it's fun for me to make observations, like how your eyelashes are surprisingly long, and that your bangs have grown out a little and look like they might be in your way, and that your Adam's apple is quite visible."

His embarrassment grew as she listed these unexpected details.

There was no way he wouldn't be embarrassed, having parts of him he was hardly even aware of described like that.

He didn’t exactly hate it, but being checked over in detail by the girl he liked suddenly made him feel like running away.

“Don’t look at me so closely, please.”

“No way, you’re adorable.”

Amane wondered what exactly she was looking at that made her say something like that, but before he could complain, he heard Mahiru’s tinkling laugh again.

“You’ve got plenty of charms, Amane-kun, even in places you yourself don’t realize. I thought I would take a good look at some of them.”

Mahiru put her hand to her mouth and laughed elegantly.

Unable to stand it, Amane grumbled, “Do as you please,” and turned back to his reference book.

Perhaps it was inevitable, but under Mahiru’s scrutiny, his posture quickly broke down, and he collapsed onto the table. Her amused laughter increased even more.

An Early Afternoon Nap, and Mahiru's Curiosity

One weekend, in the early afternoon, Amane was stretched out on the sofa enjoying a nap.

Though summer was growing closer day by day, the temperature was still comfortable without turning on the air conditioner. It was just the right season for taking afternoon naps.

About an hour after he lay down on his favorite sofa, he sensed a presence beside him and woke up.

"…Good grief, no matter how warm it might be, you'll catch a cold with your stomach exposed."

He heard a somewhat exasperated voice, and when he cracked his eyes open, he saw it was Mahiru who had spoken in a chiding tone. She was standing there with her back to him.

Then she took a blanket from the basket that was on the shelf.

When he glanced down at his own midsection, he saw that it was bare, probably because his shirt had ridden up when he had turned over in his sleep.

Thanks to Mahiru managing his diet and a moderate amount of jogging and weight lifting, he didn't have any excess fat, but he also didn't have very distinct stomach muscles like Yuuta did; his stomach was just slim enough that the muscles were faintly visible. He felt something akin to embarrassment at being so exposed in front of Mahiru.

"Really, what a hopeless guy you are…," she mumbled quietly. Her words had a sort of tender, loving ring to them, which made Amane's heart thump.

Mahiru turned around with the blanket in her hand and approached him.

He was curious to see what she would do if he kept on pretending to be asleep, and he watched her through narrowed eyes, just barely open, so that she wouldn't notice.

For some reason, Mahiru stopped and stared fixedly at his midsection, still holding the blanket.

He braced himself for her to say that his stomach looked flabby, but then Mahiru cast her eyes downward. She looked slightly embarrassed.

She glanced back up at him, then her gaze settled on his stomach again. Her cheeks were faintly flushed, and she seemed to be wavering indecisively over something.

"…Come to think of it, he did say he had been lifting weights. Compared to before…"

When she quietly muttered those words, Amane thought to himself, *You know, I guess I do have a better figure than I did when she nursed me back from that cold*.

Back then, he had been living an extremely unhealthy lifestyle, so he had looked more like a string bean than a manly man. Now he was more disciplined, however slightly, so he probably looked a lot sturdier than he had back then.

Mahiru seemed to remember that time, too, and her face suddenly turned quite red, but she still didn't take her eyes off his stomach.

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She didn’t seem to have noticed that Amane wasn’t sleeping, and she looked restless.

Amane was awake, but he couldn’t show it. He was sure that she would run away if he got up now, so all he could do was watch her. With a determined expression, Mahiru came over and softly touched his stomach, which almost made him flinch.

She seemed curious as her small hand explored his exposed abdomen.

Every time her soft fingertips ran up and down one of his meager abdominal muscles, a sensation ran slowly up his spine, which he knew he mustn’t let show on his face.

…Th-this isn’t good.

Normally, he didn’t think anything of her facing him straight on and touching him without hesitation, but it was a completely different story when she looked so timid and shy and hesitantly traced her fingers over him with the slightest pressure.

The way she was touching him was almost frustrating; plus, he was ticklish, and it seemed likely to stir up feelings and urges he didn’t want at the moment.

If she was going to do that, it would have saved Amane some grief if she had applied a little more pressure, since that wouldn’t have been such a perplexing sensation. But Mahiru carefully touched him with discretion and caution, intending not to wake Amane from his pretend sleep.

That made it all the more tantalizing.

Honestly, he was delighted to have the girl he liked there touching his body, but the location and timing were all wrong. If she kept going, things would get really out of hand.

So when he grabbed her wrist to stop her from touching him anymore, Mahiru visibly shuddered.

“…As you can imagine, touching me like that puts me in an awkward position.”

Her hand was below his abs, approaching his lower abdomen, so that was really not good. When he restrained her from going any farther, Mahiru froze all over.

Only her mouth and eyes moved. Her eyes went wide in disbelief, and her mouth opened and closed silently.

Mahiru herself probably wasn’t the least bit aware of the danger, but Amane was all too aware and had no option but to stop her.

“It’s okay for you to touch me when I’m awake, but…Mahiru?”

“Y-you were f-faking?”

“Sorry, I was curious to see what you would do.”

Amane’s words caused Mahiru’s cheeks to instantly ignite. Then she yanked her hand out of his and put the blanket over her head.

“…I-I’m sorry. I just, y-your body looked stronger than I remembered, and—”

“If you were curious, you could have just said so, and I would have let you touch me. But…how can I say this…if you touch me too much like you just were… Well, I’m a guy, so it’s not a good idea… I might have a reaction that you wouldn’t like, so I want you to be careful.”

He had narrowly avoided disaster this time, but if she had carried on touching him for just a little while longer, things would have gotten very out of hand.

“I’m grateful that you were kind enough to think of putting a blanket over me. But next time, I’d rather you just put it on and be done with it.”

“I-I’m sorry…”

“…Well, did you enjoy yourself?”

Mahiru was too cute, slumped on the floor with a bright-red face, trembling, and Amane asked in spite of his better judgment.

The moment he did, Mahiru rocked back, then battered his stomach with both fists, looking as though she might cry.

“…I was in the wrong, but now you’re just being mean, Amane-kun,” she grumbled.

She stood up and fled the room, taking the blanket with her, and Amane pressed his lips together and closed his eyes, trying to settle his body, which was still feeling somewhat restless.

Watching Over Your Friends' Romance Is Also Difficult

Chitose, who prided herself on being Mahiru's best friend, was extremely impatient about the fact that her best friend's romance was taking so long to bloom.

That was likely because both parties involved were trying to avoid overstepping. This was unavoidable, since both Mahiru and Amane were cautious by nature, but since they were clearly in love with each other, it was irritating to watch from the sidelines and see them going nowhere.

"…This one, or this one; I wonder which he would like better?"

Mahiru debated, holding two sets of clothes up to her body in an apparel shop, while Chitose gave her a half-hearted smile.

They had gone out shopping for new summer clothes that day, and after picking up a few items that caught her eye, Mahiru had started hemming and hawing over them.

From Chitose's perspective, either one would suit Mahiru, who looked stylish in most clothes, and she could practically see Mahiru getting a lot of compliments if she walked around town in either outfit.

And yet, she was hesitating, probably because she was considering how the person she liked would see her.

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“If you’re worried about Amane, I think he’d say either one is cute, you know.”

Amane was extremely thoughtful when it came to Mahiru. He was the kind of guy who could be smooth about complimenting a girl’s appearance. He had even complimented Chitose once or twice, always giving his honest impressions. It seemed that when it came to Mahiru, he would think either outfit was cute, no matter which one she chose.

At Chitose’s words, Mahiru made a strained expression and looked back and forth at the clothes she was holding.

“You’re probably right, but since I’m making the effort, well, I’d like to get one that he’ll like. I think that if I put on something he likes, I’ll look more desirable… I want him to think I look even cuter than usual. But it’s not like I want to buy something just for Amane-kun; this is for my own self-satisfaction.”

The two outfits were reflected in Mahiru’s eyes, but she seemed to be looking not at the clothes but through the clothes to Amane.

“…Amane-kun always compliments me and says I look cute when I dress up, but…well, he doesn’t really tell me what he likes. He says it’s best for me to wear what I like. That may be true, but still, I would be happy if he liked the same things I do, and it would make me happy if he really thought I looked cute. So I thought I’d dress up in something Amane-kun would like, for me.”

She smiled, a lovely, joyful, sweet smile. Her flawless smile was so beautiful that even Chitose, who was also a girl, was stunned and enchanted.

Her smile was so extremely pretty that even the shop clerk was gaping at Mahiru, so a flustered Chitose tried to put an end to it, but Mahiru didn’t seem to notice Chitose’s frustration and kept on smiling bashfully.

“Of course, I don’t mean all the time! But, like, on days when we go out together, I want to make him think I look cuter than usual, you know?”

Mahiru looked embarrassed but puffed up her chest slightly and looked up at the ceiling as if she was recalling Amane, who was not there. She looked cuter and more charming than any other girl Chitose knew.

“…Trying so hard to get him to think that I look cute and compliment me sounds awfully shameful, doesn’t it?”

“I think that any guy out there who would judge you for that would get a beating from the majority of girls.”

Chitose wouldn't tolerate any complaint leveled at a girl searching for clothes that her beloved would like in such a charming, adorable manner.

Amane was the type who would recognize, respect, and value the effort the girl made, so that gave Chitose peace of mind. But she was also in disbelief that Amane didn't realize the extent to which Mahiru cared for him.

I know that I can't say anything, but this, this is…!

If Amane saw Mahiru fretting over choosing an outfit like this, with a lovelorn expression on her face, he would instantly understand how she felt. But Mahiru didn't want to show him these secret efforts of hers.

Amane only got to see the end result of Mahiru's efforts to devise the perfect outfit.

...But getting to see dear Mahirun putting in the effort like this is my special privilege, I guess.

Chitose knew a side of Mahiru that Amane had never seen. The thought inspired a sort of tickle of happiness and a slight sense of superiority.

"…Okay, I've decided on this one."

Apparently, while Chitose had been inwardly boasting that the absent Amane must be jealous of her, Mahiru had decided which outfit to buy. She carefully returned the clothing she wasn't purchasing to the rack and carried the dress she had chosen to the register.

Watching Mahiru go, Chitose muttered quietly to herself, "Amane's pretty lucky, too, huh?"

Another day, on her way over to Mahiru's place, Chitose spotted a familiar black-haired young man standing in the park with his hands on his knees.

His shoulders were heaving up and down, and he was trying to catch his breath. He was dressed in sportswear and looked like he had just been jogging.

Thinking about it, Chitose did recall hearing a while back that he was going to start training his body and that he had asked Yuuta for advice. Yuuta and Chitose were sort of old childhood friends. Chitose could not help but find Amane's efforts charming.

"Wow, funny seeing you here!" She had spotted him as she happened to pass by, so she called out to Amane and waved as she approached him with a smile.

"Gah, Chitose!" came the extremely rude response from Amane. He seemed to be in the middle of exercising.

"Why would you react like you just ran into someone awful?"

“Whenever you show up, I’m worried that you’re just here to make fun of me. Actually, why are you here? Your house isn’t even nearby.”

“I’m here because I was invited by sweet Mahirun.”

As a general rule, whenever she and Mahiru hung out at someone’s home, they were usually at Mahiru’s.

Mahiru’s apartment was bigger than Chitose’s room, and at Chitose’s house, if it was a weekend or a school break, her older brothers were there, and they were annoying, always coming up with some kind of plan to bother the girls. Because of that, Mahiru’s place was ideal.

Chitose’s older brothers were college students, so they led quite carefree lifestyles. But neither of them showed any signs of having a girlfriend yet, so their little sister’s beautiful friend must have looked very appealing.

But from the little sister’s perspective, it made her want to shout at them that her friend was already spoken for and not to go anywhere near her, and she’d had to literally kick them out more than once.

Chitose, who had been secretly protecting Mahiru from her brothers’ clutches, grinned at Amane, who naturally knew nothing about any of that.

“Jealous?” She smiled, trying to rile him up a little.

Amane frowned slightly, perhaps somewhat offended by Chitose’s tone of voice, but he didn’t twist his face into any further expressions.

“I see. Well, go on, then, don’t make her wait.”

“Oh, that’s not nice. I made sure to get here earlier than promised!”

She was sometimes late getting to school but tried her best not to be late when she was going to hang out with friends, and she had never been late to Mahiru’s.

She had gotten there that day with enough time to spare to stand around talking to Amane, and she wasn’t going to be late just because of a brief conversation.

When she confidently asserted that she was keeping a close eye on the time, Amane looked a little fed up. He unnecessarily remarked, “And yet you just barely make it to school.”

Chitose ignored his comment for the moment.

“Anyway, enough about me. Were you exercising, Amane?”

“Yeah. I do it every day.”

“Every day? Good for you. That’s a big change from before.”

“Shaddup.”

Amane had never seemed to like exercise much, but he had changed since that spring. Chitose was just guessing, but the change had probably taken place after he admitted that he liked Mahiru.

Frankly, before then, Amane hadn't exactly been melancholy, but he had seemed like a cheerless and quiet person who didn't want to have much to do with other people, the type of person who, until Itsuki introduced them, Chitose would never have considered trying to befriend.

That all changed the moment Amane started liking someone.

As someone who had been watching close at hand as this guy, who had had a tendency to hang his head, rapidly became more forward-facing, Chitose was impressed by the magnificent power of love.

I guess people really can change.

Looking at Amane, who was trying to change himself with a positive attitude, she saw a big difference between him and the way she used to be.

In my case, if I had to say, I changed in a positive way, but for negative reasons.

Though Chitose felt somewhat sour recalling her middle school days, she didn't say a word about it and instead smiled at Amane, who had turned away to hide his embarrassment.

"Guys and girls both change when they fall in love, huh?"

"Are you by any chance smiling because you're making fun of me?"

"No way, I'm not that twisted! I'm impressed that the ever-indifferent Amane has started remodeling his body."

"…Is that so bad?"

"Uh-uh, no, but, like, I guess you're the type who can put in the work, if it's for Mahirun's sake. The power of love, and all that."

Amane suddenly froze. She waited to see if she had indeed said too much, and just when she thought his embarrassment had shifted to anger, he shook his head with a calm look in his eyes.

"…It's not exactly for Mahiru's sake. I just can't stand it when I'm there beside her and someone points out that I'm not a good match for her, because it makes her feel bad. I just want to get to a place where I can be proud of myself."

Chitose didn't feel like forcing him to admit that he was doing it for Mahiru. Amane was so straightforward when he spoke that Chitose felt somewhat relieved and laughed in spite of herself.

Wowza, they sure are two of a kind.

Amane and Mahiru would probably be judged to be complete opposites by someone who didn't know the two of them, but Chitose, who knew them both well, could see that they were two peas in a pod.

They were both hard workers who improved themselves for their own sake and not for anyone else and who never pushed responsibility off onto other people. Amane's desire to stand proudly beside Mahiru seemed like a worthy one.

From Chitose's point of view, she thought it was a wonderful thing that Amane had such determination, but on the other hand, she worried that it might become a bit of an encumbrance…but since he was voluntarily devoting himself to his own improvement, that was probably a groundless fear.

Though it's also true that things are all the more frustrating because of all that.

Chitose also knew that Amane, who was trying to improve himself, didn't want to confess his feelings to Mahiru just yet. Chitose didn't know whether she ought to sympathize with Mahiru, who was trying to charm Amane, or with Amane, who was head over heels for Mahiru and yet was convinced that his rational mind was being shaken apart by her efforts to appeal to him.

In either case, the two of them didn't seem as if they were going to come clean with each other any time soon, so it was frustrating to watch them steadfastly continue to not get together.

For the time being, Chitose slapped Amane firmly on the back in a show of support.

He glared at her, his eyes asking why she did that, and Chitose answered with a cackling laugh.

"You got some kind of problem?" he asked.

"Nah, just thinking that you sure are awfully serious and earnest, Amane. By the way, what do you like best about dear Mahirun?"

"Huh?!"

When she took the opportunity to ask something that she had been curious about, Amane opened his eyes wide and flapped his mouth open and closed in an expression of shock.

He was more surprised than she had expected. She had previously tried to avoid asking such things directly, but now that Amane had properly recognized his feelings and was working on making positive changes, she figured it was all right to ask.

Chitose could see that Amane had never expected to be asked that so suddenly, and she cackled again and waved her hand.

“I’m not going to tell Mahirun or anything. I wouldn’t do anything that crazy. I just thought you were pretty straitlaced and kind of a misanthrope…I mean, a highly wary person, so I was wondering what it was you liked about her.”

“…Any reason I need to tell you that?”

“Well, not really, but I’m just curious. Everyone likes Mahirun, but I figured you probably don’t have the same reasons as the rest of them. I guess you could say I’m curious because I’m friends with both of you.”

Mahiru was cute. She was popular with the boys, and even from the perspective of a member of the same sex like Chitose, her mannerisms, appearance, and personality were all obviously appealing.

If Chitose had asked the other students at school what they liked about Mahiru, most of them would have answered, as expected, that they liked her because she was a picture-perfect girl, an angel who was good at school and sports, who was gentle and kind toward everyone, and who treated everyone equally.

Chitose knew Mahiru quite well, and the picture she had of her was rather different from the boys who did not really know her.

And since Amane knew Mahiru even better than Chitose, his ideas of what kind of girl Mahiru was and what he liked about her ought to have been different than hers.

This time, she looked at Amane without any teasing. He frowned and looked as if he was thinking hard, then lowered his gaze, with a troubled expression.

“…It’s hard to answer…exactly what it is I like about her. I think I like everything, all together.”

In a sense, his answer, given after some thought, was just what she had expected.

“…Mahiru’s not as perfect as everybody thinks. She seems reserved, but she can be really stubborn, and sometimes she’s got a sharp tongue. She judges things ruthlessly, without hesitation or compromise. She pouts and sulks at weird times, then headbutts me or punches me repeatedly. She totally lets her guard down and falls asleep wherever she is, then gets frightened when she has a nightmare… It’s obvious if you take a close look at her, but she’s an ordinary girl.”

Amane’s expression as he quietly listed off trait after trait was utterly affectionate. Chitose was certain he was calling an image of Mahiru to mind as he spoke.

“…I don’t know how much you’ve heard about her past, Chitose. She always hides it with a smile, but she’s a lonely person at heart, and because of that, I think she’s timid about reaching out to others. I told her she can rely on me, but she’s the

type who's not sure how to rely on anyone, or how much she can rely on them, so she retreats into herself and endures the stress alone. You could say she puts on a show of courage."

Chitose also understood that, more or less.

Mahiru wouldn't lean on Chitose when she was having a really hard time. She had seen her try to swallow unpleasant feelings without letting them show on the surface.

"When she first started taking care of me, I felt like I wanted to cherish her and be by her side. Which I think is probably different than wanting to protect her. I mean, I want to protect her from unnecessary and unreasonable suffering, but…how can I put this? …I felt like I wanted to snuggle up close beside Mahiru, who always puts on a strong face and is bad at relying on others and is easily frightened and tends to get lonely."

Amane spoke in a quiet tone of voice and lowered his gaze as he spoke at length about treasuring a certain girl who was not present.

"…I want her to smile; I want to support her by her side. I want to be there for her even when things are tough. I want us to overcome difficulties together. Whenever Mahiru wants to cry, I want to stop her and help bear her suffering."

Then he lifted his face, and even Chitose had to stare straight at Amane, whose eyes clearly housed a gentle yet certain sense of purpose.

"To answer your question of what I like about her, I like everything. Everything, her strong points and weak points; it's all wonderful… And that's my reason. What's wrong with that?"

Amane turned away, his cheeks faintly flushed, perhaps from embarrassment at spelling it all out. Chitose's lips naturally arched up in a gentle smile.

Wow, even Mahirun would be charmed by that, huh?

He was a guy who respected and valued her to that degree. Mahiru probably fell for him as hard as she did precisely because she picked up on that.

Chitose felt that the two of them were bound to fall in love with each other. She followed Amane as he moved over to the park fountain to try to do something about his increasingly red cheeks.

"Hey, Amane?"

She spoke to Amane, who was cooling his bright-red face, rinsing the sweat off with rough movements. He glared back at her, perhaps because he hadn't been able to shake all the embarrassment yet.

"What? Don't you dare tell me I stink."

“Of course not, I would never say something so rude! I just, well, I’m glad I’m friends with you, Amane.”

“…Why would you say that all of a sudden? It’s embarrassing.”

“Heh-heh, I just thought it!”

Just thought I would let you know.

Chitose herself was different. She had gotten to know lots of people and made all sorts of friends, but even among all the different personalities she had seen so far, she genuinely felt glad to have met Amane. He would never bump Itsuki out of first place, but she thought she might rank Amane close behind.

Seriously, if he would just be up-front with Mahirun about what he just told me, they’d be together in a split second.

Even Chitose felt her cheeks grow warm after hearing about his passionate feelings of love. Amane had such earnest, unwavering feelings for Mahiru that Chitose suspected her friend would turn bright red and collapse on the spot if she ever heard about them.

Chitose reached the conclusion that it was ultimately going to be an irritating waiting game, and she laughed to herself. Amane gave her a puzzled look, but Chitose didn’t pay it any mind as she happily chuckled and lightly smacked Amane’s back.

The slap meant both *good luck* and *tell her soon*.

“All right, time for me to get going. Oh, that’s right. You’d better not eat too much at dinner. There’s gonna be dessert.”

Chitose was on her way to Mahiru’s house to make sweets, and she was sure they would be offered to Amane after dinner.

Chitose was already feeling a tiny bit of heartburn even though she hadn’t even arrived at Mahiru’s place yet, much less made the sweets. She laughed once more at Amane, who didn’t seem to know what to make of her, and dashed off.

“Ah, so this is why the two of them are…”

Musing that it was truly a difficult thing to watch over her friends’ romance without saying things she shouldn’t, Chitose headed for Mahiru’s apartment in high spirits.

Even the Angel Is Bad at Some Things

Amane was, if anything, a person of leisure.

That was because, unlike other students, he didn't take part in club activities, and he didn't work a part-time job, either. On top of that, he lived alone but had been eating dinner with Mahiru, which reduced the time he spent on housework.

Of course, he never slacked off at his studies, and he did a decent, average job at cleaning now that he had learned the ropes from Mahiru, and he kept his apartment neat and tidy. Plus, he exercised every day in his efforts to remake himself.

Though he had more to do than the other students in the go-home club who lived with their parents, Amane was nevertheless, if anything, a person of leisure. He also had a higher degree of freedom than those students who lived under their parents' roofs, considering he had no parents ordering him around in his day-to-day life.

That's why Amane once again found himself with a surplus of time on his hands.

He had already finished all his schoolwork, so he did his weight training as soon as he woke up, then took care of the shopping in the morning when he went out jogging.

He had started paying attention to the housework on a daily basis, so even on days off, there was no need to do any large-scale cleaning, and he could keep his place tidy with a little routine maintenance.

By three in the afternoon, Amane was ready to relax and enjoy some video games.

He had moved the low table out of the way so he could play more comfortably, and he had taken up his usual position in front of the television, sitting on a fluffy rug that he had washed and de-fuzzed the other day.

It's been a while since I did this.

The game he had booted up was a side-scrolling action game featuring a cute pastel-pink character with a nearly spherical body that he had to guide through each stage.

It was a game that had gone on sale many years earlier, and Amane had cleared it countless times. The fact that he could play it through every time without getting bored spoke to the fun of the gameplay.

Amane rarely replayed games with involved storylines, because he was satisfied with them once he cleared them the first time. At most, he could play through them twice. The second time through, he would exhaust all the elements the game had to offer, and after that, he would rarely feel like playing the game again.

I don't care what anyone says. I can always enjoy an action game that handles so intuitively, Amane thought earnestly.

As Amane was enjoying the stream of cheerful melodies and bright graphics, Mahiru sat down quietly beside him.

Recently, Mahiru had been spending at least one day each weekend at Amane's place, and she was with him that day, too, after making lunch for the two of them.

They didn't necessarily always pay attention to each other just because they were together, and they often spent time doing their own things, so even when Amane was playing a video game, Mahiru often did something else, but…that day, she seemed to be interested in the game.

Mahiru brought a cushion over, took a seat beside Amane, and sat looking at the television screen.

"Is this fun?"

"I wouldn't be playing it if it wasn't."

"I guess that's true. There's a cute character moving about, so it just caught my interest."

The player character in the game was very cute, so Amane could understand why it had caught Mahiru's attention, since she liked adorable things.

"This is your kind of cute, isn't it, Mahiru? This character is really popular and gets made into a ton of toys and stuff, so I think it was designed to be easy to like."

"I mean, it's got big round eyes, and it looks squishy and cute."

"Yeah, true, but the stuff it's doing is pretty demonic. It's surprisingly brutal. There's absolutely no mercy when it takes down enemies."

"Oh…?"

The way Amane was playing, he was purposely holding back and avoiding making careless attacks, so from Mahiru's perspective, it must have just looked like

the cute character was moving around, bouncing through the air, and crossing paths with crowds of enemies.

Once he revealed the character's signature method of attack, it wouldn't seem so cute.

It literally sucked in enemies, stole their power, and used it to defeat them.

The enemies that the player character sucked in never regained their original form, and the player could swap powers if there was an enemy with a better ability. Any discarded abilities got discharged as bundles of energy and eventually disappeared.

The impression that the game gave was superficially cute, but it was actually kind of horrifying if you took a minute to think hard about it. Seeing it laid out like that, a game where you defeated enemies with conventional weapons seemed less brutal somehow.

"You have a real weakness for cute things, huh, Mahiru?"

"…Is that a bad thing?"

"No, I think it's cute."

"…I feel like you're making fun of me."

That hadn't been his intention, but she seemed to have taken it that way. Mahiru stuck her pink lip out a little bit in an expression of dissatisfaction.

Though Amane thought that she looked even cuter like that, he had a feeling that his next comment would get him slapped, so he swallowed his words and resumed his game without saying anything.

The character with the cute body bounced through the level, passing through openings between enemies. Mahiru watched with some excitement, and Amane found himself smiling as well.

"If you're interested, want to try it?" Amane asked, expecting that she might want to try playing, if the game had drawn her interest. Mahiru seemed to be unexpectedly brimming with curiosity.

"Is that all right?" Mahiru asked timidly, in a quiet voice.

"If it wasn't, I wouldn't have said anything. Plus, I have fun just watching, so go ahead."

"…Well then, I'll give it a try."

Her curiosity seemed to win out over her reservations, and with some hesitation, Mahiru accepted the controller that Amane offered to her.

To start with, he had her select the first stage as a kind of tutorial and explained how to operate the buttons as well as a summary of the special characteristics of the player character, then left her to her own devices, but—

Immediately, she looked as if she was about to cry.

The same thing had happened once when he let her play a racing game. It was sad to say, but Mahiru was extremely bad at video games.

It wasn't that she made absolutely no progress, but she was the type to take a great deal of time before taking the next step forward, and though she got the basics and had the ability to learn, for some reason, it wasn't reflected in her gameplay.

To Amane, who could pretty much figure out most games the first time he played them, Mahiru seemed like a very strange creature.

"I don't understand how you've managed to die so much."

"I don't understand, either."

"I'm pretty sure you've got good hand-eye coordination, but…"

"Ughhh!"

"I think you just have to get used to playing? It's not really an issue if you can't get it."

For Amane, games were nothing more than entertainment, and enjoying them was the most important thing, since that was what they were for.

Mahiru had no obligation to play, and it wouldn't cause any problems if she couldn't master the game. No one would criticize her for being unable to do it—Amane certainly had no intention of doing so.

And yet Mahiru narrowed her eyes and glared slightly at the game screen.

"…Isn't it frustrating when you can't do something?" she muttered.

Mahiru was right; it was frustrating.

"You do hate losing to things like this, huh? All right, then. Do your best."

If she wanted to play, Amane wasn't going to stop her.

Though he decided he might intervene if she kept going for a long time, an hour at most.

They had time to kill, and if Mahiru said she wanted to keep playing, he would leave her to it. Even if she couldn't beat the game, it wasn't as if there was anything at stake.

Mahiru gripped the controller with renewed motivation, but then she glanced over at him as if she wanted something.

"…Amane-kun, please teach me. In detail this time."

"Sure thing."

Mahiru seemed to have decided that it would be best for someone who could already do it to teach her exactly how to do it first, and she asked Amane for another round of instruction, so he readily agreed.

…Amane realized that he had agreed too hastily when Mahiru stood up and reseated herself in the gap between his loosely crossed legs.

Not paying him any mind when he froze from this all-too-sudden development, Mahiru sat down with her arms around her knees, nimbly avoiding Amane's legs as she found a spot for herself.

"Why?"

"If you're going to teach me the skills to play, I think it will be more efficient to have you actually move my hands on the buttons. That would be hard to do sitting beside each other, so this is the only way."

He understood that it would be easier for her to learn to use the controller if they sat close together and he gave her a detailed demonstration. But his responsible side warned him that this would definitely cause problems for him, and it would be hard for him to focus.

They were extremely close together. They had hugged before, but this seemed to be a different sort of closeness.

At the moment, he was leaning back on his hands, so their bodies weren't in real contact, but if he leaned forward just a little, their torsos would touch, and he would likely bump the back of Mahiru's head with his face.

If he placed his hands on the controller that Mahiru was holding, he would end up embracing her from behind.

"…Uh, I'm not sure about that—"

"So what do I do?"

Ah, she's not going to listen!

Amane put his head in his hand when Mahiru purposely ignored his comment. He was worried he had a headache coming on, but he probably should have been more concerned about the pain in his heart than in his head at that moment.

How had his fun weekend game time transformed into such delightful, distressing torture?

If he could have been honest about his desires and happily embraced Mahiru, this would have been a great moment. But Amane's reason and common sense wouldn't let him, so this felt like a new type of bullying, like being forced to wait while a tasty morsel was dangled right before his eyes.

And yet he couldn't definitively say that it was unpleasant. Plus, Mahiru was relying on him without any ulterior motives. She trusted Amane, which was why she had installed herself on his lap.

In other words, Amane would need to endure it.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you, princess."

Whatever happens, happens, he thought, giving in. He hoped she would forgive him.

In response to Mahiru's urgent tone of voice, Amane carefully bolstered his armor of reason then lightly placed his own hands on top of Mahiru's, which were holding the controller.

Mahiru's sweet, somewhat invigorating aroma gently wafted up at him, causing a major momentary tremor in his sense of reason. But somehow he suppressed the urge to embrace her and managed to leave a gap between them as he wrapped his arms around her.

His painstaking efforts to sit in a way that wouldn't be objectionable all came to nothing when Mahiru leaned right back onto him.

"I keep getting 'game over' in the same spot, so what's the best way to deal with it?"

"…Indeed, whatever shall we do?"

"Why are you talking weird?"

Holding back his desire to ask her pointedly whose fault that might be, Amane looked down at Mahiru, who was relaxing against him.

Her small body fit easily within Amane's arms, as if it was completely natural for her to be there. Amane thought they were dangerously close, but Mahiru didn't seem bothered, so he seemed to be the only one aware of it.

…She doesn't see me as a man, does she?

As he was thinking that in deadly earnest, he flung his other thoughts—the inexcusable ideas that arose in response to Mahiru's expectations as she leaned against him—out of his head, and he tried to not be aware of them as he guided her hands, giving her instructions for the game.

Amane tried to convince himself that she was just some kid from the neighborhood and decided to support Mahiru's movements as she operated the game the best she could.

“So you should watch how the enemies move. These guys only move however they’re programmed to move, so once you see their regular pattern, you can defeat them.”

“I can’t see it; that’s why I’m struggling.”

“It’s just a matter of practice. Here, try it now.”

“…Why did I just get ‘game over’? He didn’t hit me.”

“Sorry, but yes, he did. I saw it.

“…But I dodged it perfectly!”

“Don’t pout, don’t pout. Look, you can start the stage over from the beginning.”

Once he got used to the situation, his amusement at Mahiru’s lack of skill won out over his awareness of her proximity, so with quiet relief, he showed her how to defeat the game’s enemies.

“There…see, you did it! Yeah, yeah, good. Great job.”

Mahiru didn’t seem to mind the repetitious practice, and she slowly learned how to do it after trying again and again. When she succeeded, Amane praised her highly.

He gave his praise gently, almost in a whisper, fearing he would be too loud if he raised his voice so close to her.

Mahiru let out a quiet groan.

“Mahiru?”

“N-nothing. Umm…that, uh, d-didn’t really go so well, huh?”

It was unlike her to become so flustered, but what she was saying wasn’t particularly strange, so Amane let it go as just one of those things.

“Well, I think things like this are a matter of practice. I bet you just need to do it a few more times. If you’re not having fun, you can just stop—”

“That’s not true!”

“O-oh, really? That’s fine, then…”

Amane flinched when Mahiru suddenly raised her voice, but as bewildered as he was, Mahiru looked even more perplexed, and she hung her head.

“…I’m ashamed of how careless and foolish I’m being.”

“Don’t beat yourself up so much about a silly game.”

“That’s not what I mean, but…it’s fine.”

“Uhhh…?”

Ultimately, all Amane could do was tilt his head in confusion. He wasn't sure what she was talking about. Mahiru didn't seem inclined to answer Amane's unspoken question; instead, she hung her head and hugged her knees.

"…Um, Amane-kun, teaching me like this…you…don't find it unpleasant?"

Eventually, a quiet inquiry was put forth.

"Not at all. Just, well, we're a little close… I was wondering if you might be finding it unpleasant."

"Why would I, when I'm the one who chose to sit like this?"

"Well, um…it's a little dangerous? I might touch something I shouldn't?"

The way they were sitting at the moment, Amane could have easily embraced her tightly, and if he'd wanted to, he could have slipped his hands into places they shouldn't go.

Since Amane didn't want her to hate him, and since he thought that sort of thing was for lovers to do together, he didn't have the slightest intention of laying an indecent hand on her, but not having such intentions was a different thing from not being on guard against it.

As always, Mahiru was not wary enough around Amane.

"…Are you going to?"

In response to Amane's words, Mahiru leaned back against him and looked up at him.

Her clear, caramel-colored eyes hid a mischievous twinkle. Her cheeks, which looked more flushed than usual, softened as she smiled.

Faced with that teasing expression, Amane purposely puckered up his face and grabbed her tender-looking cheeks.

"Nope."

"Uahhh!"

He chided her that there were things that were and were not okay to say, even as a joke, as he squished and pulled Mahiru's cheeks like soft rice cakes. In response, he got a goofy, high-pitched shriek.

Wholeheartedly relieved that her squealing had no sex appeal, Amane took several slow, deep breaths to calm his heart before it pounded out of his chest.

...My heart can't take this.

Without a doubt, she must have been teasing him on purpose.

Amane sighed as he pinched her soft cheeks, thinking about how skilled she was at getting a rise out of people. In his arms, Mahiru grumbled in complaint, "How long are you gonna do that? Geez…"

They eventually pulled themselves together and continued playing the game, but after two continuous hours of play, they were forced to accept that Mahiru was not suited for action games.

A Sleepover and a Story from the Past

“You know, Mahirun, your skin is so pretty.”

Mahiru heard the faint sound of skin breaking the surface of the water as Chitose submerged herself right in front of Mahiru and quietly mumbled this compliment.

The bathtub, which was spacious when Mahiru was alone, felt a little small with two people in it.

But Mahiru had gotten so used to Chitose’s presence that being a bit cramped felt cozy.

Chitose, who had come to stay over on the weekend, had wanted to take a bath, so with no reason to decline, Mahiru had agreed. But even with another girl, she didn’t love the idea of being looked at.

The only reason she didn’t feel too uncomfortable was probably because the person looking was Chitose, who offered her pure admiration.

“Thank you very much. If it looks that way, I guess that means my efforts are worth it.”

There was no being modest in the bath, so Mahiru nodded and simply accepted the compliment.

She was the type of person who was willing to put in the work and who always held herself to a high standard, so naturally she took good care of her skin.

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Mahiru went out of her way to dress herself in clothes that were nice to the touch and made of materials that were gentle on the skin. She believed that a beautiful body started from the inside, so she paid attention to the nutritional balance of her meals and made sure to get plenty of sleep. She was careful not to get dehydrated or sunburned, and she avoided exposing her unprotected skin to ultraviolet rays.

She always kept clean, and after washing gently and carefully in the bath, not scrubbing too hard so that she didn't damage her skin, she applied toners and lotions as well as oils after getting out, to lock in plenty of hydration and stay moisturized.

By doing all that together, she kept her skin springy, smooth, and soft.

She couldn't slack off just because she was young. Beauty was something deliberate, an ephemeral thing that could crumble away if she didn't put in the effort. That was a lesson from her housekeeper, Koyuki.

Thinking about all the effort she put in, Mahiru accepted the praise as well-deserved. Chitose's gaze made her a little embarrassed when it fell on her face and her chest where it was sticking out of the water, as well as the parts that were under the water's surface, but she wasn't going to rebuke her friend for looking.

Still, she didn't like being stared at.

"…It's so smooth and milky white. I've got a little bit of a tan, unfortunately. I'm jealous."

"I don't think you should be jealous. Sure, you've got more color than me because you spend more time outside, but I think it's a healthy, attractive color. If I got any paler, I'd look ill."

Chitose really did have a nice, healthy complexion, though unlike Mahiru, she didn't make it her mission to completely avoid the sun, so she wasn't so pale that her veins showed through.

Mahiru turned red if she ever got a lot of sun and went through hell until it healed, which was why she was so cautious, so she actually felt slightly envious of skin like Chitose's.

Chitose had called Mahiru pretty, but from Mahiru's perspective, Chitose's lean, graceful figure was just as attractive.

Chitose had mentioned that she found it difficult to put on weight, and Mahiru knew that Chitose exercised, but even so, to a girl like Mahiru, not having to pay attention to calories despite eating a lot sounded like the ideal.

“I know everyone wants what they can’t have, but seriously I’m really jealous of you, Mahirun. Of course, I’m sure that the upkeep must be a total pain. No amount of effort on my part is going to change the skin color and chest I was born with, I guess.”

Chitose went on to bemoan the fact that her chest wouldn’t get any bigger no matter what she did, and Mahiru could do nothing but frown.

There were genetic factors at play, so Mahiru knew it wasn’t her place to say anything, and she thought that any comment would sound offensive, since she understood what her own figure looked like.

She gently pinned down the bulges that felt a little lighter than usual because they were underwater and let out a quiet sigh into the bathwater.

When it came to her chest, Mahiru was already well-developed, so she didn’t have much to complain about.

In fact, she’d had trouble figuring out the right size underwear once she hit puberty. And she had had to put up with rude stares all through elementary and middle school.

But that wasn’t the sort of information that Chitose would find helpful.

“Ikkun’s always making fun of me for it, can you believe that? I get enough to eat, and they get massaged plenty, but they won’t get any bigger, so I don’t know what else to do. I can’t let him at them any more than I already do, so I’m just gonna say it’s his fault.”

“I don’t think you ought to talk about such things so openly!”

“It’s just you and me, Mahirun, so no worries, no worries… Mahirun, you can relax, you know. Guys usually like big ones.”

“That is not relaxing information, and it’s not necessarily the case that Amane-kun likes big ones!”

“I didn’t say a thing about Amane, now did I?”

“Ah—”

“Okay, I get it, stop attacking me with your army of ducks!” Chitose cried with a satisfied smile on her face.

When Mahiru vented her anger by shoving the ducks that were floating on the bathwater at her, Chitose seemed to just enjoy herself even more.

Mahiru glared at her in irritation, but the smile on Chitose’s face never abated.

“You’re awfully attuned to the preferences of the guy you like, huh?”

“…I think Amane-kun is the kind of person who doesn’t care about body type.”

“Sure, well, I think that he probably doesn’t care once he already likes someone, but even so, I’m pretty sure bigger is better. I don’t think you have to worry about that, though, Mahirun.”

“…Amane-kun is not that big of a pervert.”

“I think that’s your own fantasy, though, Mahirun. Amane’s also a…well, I guess more or less, he *is* still a guy.”

“Aren’t you being a little harsh?”

“Look at how he behaves himself.”

Judging by his typical behavior, Amane was actually quite considerate, and he seemed like the perfect gentleman to Mahiru, but within the confines of the current conversation, that might not actually be ideal.

Chitose had once referred to Amane as someone who always erred on the side of caution, and he certainly did seem to be a real worrywart to Mahiru. But that was something she actually liked about him, and it didn’t bother her.

Though she did worry on occasion if she might be lacking a certain appeal.

“…Anyway, leaving aside all this talk of boobs—”

“You’re the one who brought it up, Chitose-san.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, you sure are pretty, Mahirun. I mean it. White as an egg, you could say. How nice, to be smooth and springy and moisturized and glossy and supple!”

“I think you’re describing an egg, or maybe some kind of gelatinous material?”

“Aren’t you already jelly? You’re ridiculously soft…how do you keep this skin so moisturized?”

“I usually use toner, lotion, and oil. If you want, you could give it a try, too, Chitose-san? Though I don’t know whether it will be right for your skin.”

The skin-care products Mahiru used cost quite a bit of money, and they were all very high quality. But that didn’t necessarily mean they were compatible with someone else’s skin. It was a matter of individual physiology, so it wasn’t necessarily true that the products Mahiru used would be good for Chitose. But she could try them and go from there.

“Could I? Beauty Salon Mahiru is open for business?”

“It’s not that big of a deal. You just smear it on and then massage it in; you can do it yourself. I’m sure you don’t want me putting my hands all over you.”

“Wait, but I’m just fine with touching you and getting touched by you, Mahirun. Actually, I want to touch.”

“…Where are you planning on touching?”

Chitose's gaze shifted down to Mahiru's body, so she quickly covered herself with both arms, but Chitose cackled with laughter and waved a hand in front of her.

"Just joking, just joking. Of course, if someone's touching you, that'll be Amane, right?"

"…Chitose-san."

"Heh-heh, you can't frighten me, not with that bright-red face. You just end up looking cute instead… I get it already, stop glaring at me!"

"And just whose fault is that?"

"Yeah, yeah… But seriously, in a way, it's really impressive that Amane can pull himself away without letting anything show on his face, when you squish these things against him."

"It's not like I've been squishing them against him on purpose, though."

"Uh-huh, I've watched you do it and seeing that made me think you're a natural seductress."

"It's not natural, either."

"Sure, sure, whatever you say."

Chitose's knowing grin pierced Mahiru's heart, so even though she wanted to object, Chitose didn't seem likely to hear what she had to say.

She formed her face into a discontented pout, but that only made Chitose smirk even harder.

There was no way she could hold her own against Chitose, so Mahiru stopped trying to hide and let out a big sigh.

"Well, Amane never makes a move unless he gets a push, so I think you're doing the right thing, putting the pressure on. I think you'll be happy with the results if you keep on pushing until you see the wolf inside."

Just as Mahiru was thinking it was about time to get out of the bath, since she was feeling flushed from Chitose teasing her about all sorts of things that she didn't consider to be joking matters, Chitose spoke to her not in a teasing manner, but in a gentle tone of voice.

I don't think that Amane-kun has got a wolf inside him…

She did actually think that Amane was someone with wolflike qualities, but not in the way Chitose was thinking.

Wolves are devoted creatures that care for members of their pack and form strong bonds with their mates.

A person who was kind and thoughtful to the very end once you were in his circle—that was Mahiru's impression of Amane.

Thinking about how she wished she could form that kind of bond with Amane, she retrieved the skin toner that she had laid out, rubbed it in her hands, and slid it over her body.

She wasn't quite out of the bath yet. Before stepping into the changing area, before drying herself with a towel, the first task in her skin-care routine was to lock in the generous amount of moisture that her skin now held, so she spread on the toner carefully.

"…Even supposing that he did turn into that wolf you're talking about, I think Amane-kun is the type of guy who would kneel and beg forgiveness afterward."

"Ah-ha-ha, you're not wrong! He would definitely take responsibility."

"…Gradually chipping away at things isn't exactly my ideal, so I wouldn't be too unhappy about it."

"You wouldn't? So you mean you'd be kind of happy to get gobbled up?"

"I'm not loaning you any skin-care products anymore."

"I'm sorry, I'm sooorry!"

Chitose got out of the bathtub with a big grin on her face as Mahiru gave her a warning in a slightly sharp tone of voice. Mahiru sighed again and passed Chitose the bottle of toner.

After properly completing their skin-care and hair-care routines, Mahiru and Chitose changed into their pajamas and were finally able to relax in the bedroom.

Mahiru had been unable to relax in the bath because of Chitose's direct and intrusive interrogation. But Chitose must have sensed Mahiru's subtle signs of mental exhaustion, because she was deliberately not paying attention to her and was instead smiling at herself. "My skin is so much smoother than usual!"

Chitose was wearing a gray sweatshirt and shorts. She sat cross-legged, happily rubbing her legs where they stuck out from her shorts.

"Wow, I feel like a twelve out of ten today!"

"That's great. I think you'd get an extra point if you corrected your posture, though."

"Man, you're so strict. You never sit like this, do you, Mahirun?"

"If I did, you'd totally be able to see my underpants."

Chitose was the type to wear shorts, but Mahiru had on a nightgown with long sleeves and a hem down to her ankles.

Even though it was fluttery and had plenty of space to spare, it wouldn't be enough for her to sit cross-legged, and if she did, she would have to hike it up, and that would be far too immodest.

Instead, Mahiru sat with both legs slightly to one side, and Chitose looked at her with what seemed to be admiration.

"You've got a lot of pajamas like that, huh, Mahirun? I think they're cute, but my big brother would laugh at me and tell me they're all wrong for me, I'm sure."

"Can I just say, I think it's all right to let things that people with no tact tell you pass right in one ear and out the other?"

"Oh, harsh! You're really hard on my big brother, aren't you? Though I guess he did make fun of Amane, so I get why you wouldn't like him."

Chitose smiled and explained that he had been teasing them out of affection and not malice, but Mahiru couldn't conjure much in the way of good feelings when she recalled meeting Chitose's brother. Previously, when they had gone over to Chitose's house to hang out, she had heard one of her brothers saying insulting things about both Chitose and Amane, so Mahiru could never see herself liking that older brother.

As far as Mahiru was concerned, he had made fun of two of her dearest friends, so it was impossible for her to like him.

Deep down, she could have found a way to ignore him making fun of Amane, because he didn't really know him. But the things he'd said about Chitose were a different matter.

She knew that Chitose's older brother had only used such indelicate words toward Chitose because they were family, but even so, there were things that were okay to say and things that were not. Chitose always laughed and said she was used to it, but even she had to be hurt by it.

It was unthinkable that Mahiru would hold any goodwill toward a person who could misjudge that.

"…If I had to say, the thing I disliked about him was the way he treated you, Chitose-san. And that he laughed at you after making fun of you."

"Huh? …Well, let me just say in his defense that I like my big brother, and he's got good points, too, okay? That said, he is the type to run his mouth without thinking and then feel bad after saying something uncalled for. After you went home, he came and apologized to me."

"Even so, you seemed so sad when he was saying it, so I can't allow it. I think your brother must have something wrong with his eyes. You're cute, Chitose-san. No matter what anyone says. I guarantee it."

Mahiru looked straight at Chitose as she made this declaration, unwilling to concede that point. Chitose looked puzzled but happy, and her face curved into a smile.

"…You think I would look all right in a cute, fluttery thing like that?"

"I think it would suit you just fine. You should let me dress you up from time to time. Let's throw your Akazawa-san for a loop."

"Good idea! I like the thought of shocking Ikkun."

Chitose looked adorable when she wore her easygoing smile. That alone was enough to convince Mahiru that what her friend's brother said must be wrong.

Chitose threw her arms around Mahiru with a gentle smile, and Mahiru found herself smiling as well. She chided Chitose to cut it out but let her do as she pleased.

"Mahirun, Mahirun, let's go buy matching pajamas together soon!"

"Sure, that's no problem."

When Mahiru readily agreed, Chitose's smile changed.

Mahiru had felt reassured by her friend's usual cheerful grin, but looking at this new smile gave her a bad feeling for some reason.

"Whoo-hoo! You already agreed, so now you have to let me dress you in a sheer negligee!"

"Hang on?! If we're matching, that means you have to put it on, too, you know?!"

"Yeah, that's fine. Of course, I'll only wear it in front of Ikkun, though. What will you do with yours?" Chitose leered in satisfaction.

Mahiru reflexively slapped at Chitose's thighs.

Chitose was still clinging to her, so she couldn't rip her away by force, and smacking her was her only recourse. But Chitose didn't seem to mind.

"But I'm sure it'll look great on you, Mahirun! I bet you'll transform into a sweet little temptress."

"Isn't that a contradiction?"

"If it is, then you're going to embody it."

"Who do you think I am?"

"You're my sweet, lovely Mahirun!"

"…Geez."

Chitose seemed to think that calling Mahiru "sweet" and "lovely" was enough to earn her forgiveness. Mahiru slapped Chitose on the thigh once more, then in order to drive the image she had briefly conjured of wearing a negligee in front of Amane from her mind, she threw herself to the floor, Chitose and all.

"…Come to think of it, how did you and Akazawa-san wind up dating, Chitose-san?"

They had turned off the room's overhead light and just had the side lamp on, gradually getting ready to sleep, when Mahiru hit Chitose, who was lying beside her, with a question that she had been curious about.

Chitose was always elated to gossip about love interests when she stayed over, but surprisingly, she had never thought to tell Mahiru her own story.

Illuminated by the faint lamplight, Chitose snapped her eyes open and shut dramatically several times.

"Me? I don't think it's all that interesting of a story, and if anything, there's probably some parts that will make you uncomfortable."

Chitose had already been dating Itsuki when she met Mahiru, and she always talked about how close they were now, but she rarely said anything about the past.

Mahiru had raised the question because she realized that she hadn't expressly asked about it before, but Chitose didn't seem to want to volunteer the story.

"I'm not exactly hiding anything, but…hmm. Well, I guess it would be unfair not to tell you, since I'm watching your romance grow."

Chitose let her gaze drift around, looking not displeased but rather unsure how to explain. Somehow or other, Mahiru could tell that this behavior was something she did when she was remembering.

"Just know that it's not the sweet story you're expecting, all right, Mahirun?"

"…As long as you don't mind telling it."

"Okay. Mm, how do I put this, I feel so embarrassed just thinking about things from way back then. So before I was dating Ikkun, right? And I can see my old self from an objective point of view now, but I was dull, I guess you could say, and pretty bad at getting along with people. I wasn't interested in anything but running. You know, that kind of person. And I was always fighting with my brothers, so I'd say I wasn't a super-charming girl."

"Hard to imagine, huh?" Chitose said a bit sadly when she saw Mahiru, who was stiff as a statue, struggling to picture it.

The Chitose of the present was cheerful and friendly with everyone. She was always smiling and seemed to be loved by everyone around her.

The Chitose of the past that she was describing sounded like her complete opposite.

"So that's why I was always hated by this one group of upperclassmen in my track club, see? Especially after I snatched one of the regulars' positions. Their

jealousy…I guess it was unavoidable, and it's not like I was rude to them or looked down on them or anything, but there's only so much you can do in school. It's a microcosm of society, after all. 'The nail that sticks out gets hammered down' and all that."

Mahiru had had a similar experience.

For better or worse, Mahiru had always stood out in all sorts of ways thanks to her hard work and the talents she was born with. As someone who had also experienced envy and jealousy, she sympathized deeply.

In Chitose's case, people were jealous of her physical prowess.

"On top of all that, Ikkun had to go and confess his love for me. One of the upperclassmen who held a real grudge against me apparently had it bad for Ikkun, too. At first, I didn't really know Ikkun at all and had never considered dating him, so I turned him down, but even though I rejected him, from that point on, that upperclassman's harassment got really bad."

Chitose was telling the story now with a smile on her face, but at the time, it must have been a terrible ordeal.

"I told him I loved running, and turned him down, and I thought that was the end of it, but that upperclassman didn't like my attitude. She didn't give up on Ikkun, either, so the harassment escalated in all sorts of ways, you see?"

"That's…"

"Even so, I put up with it, but well, ultimately, the upperclassman resorted to violence. Up until then, everything had always been indirect, but that time she directly… I suspect that she herself probably didn't mean for it to go so far. In the middle of practice, she deliberately injured me."

Without meaning to, Mahiru mumbled something about the situation transcending a simple interpersonal disagreement.

"Well, without talking to an adviser, I don't think I'll ever know," Chitose answered with a bitter smile. Her reaction wrenched Mahiru's heart.

"I injured my leg, the most important thing for running track, and was removed from the roster right before a competition. Well, I felt like I had lost my reason for living, like I had lost the place where I belonged. I was so upset I skipped out on the hospital and was out there staring blankly at the sports field when Itsuki came up to me to apologize. 'It was my fault,' he said… It wasn't his fault at all, of course. It was all because of that upperclassman, who was lashing out at me. I knew that, but still, in some corner of my heart, I did think it might have been because Ikkun had confessed his feelings for me. I was too ashamed of myself for thinking such a thing, and I cried

right there in front of Ikkun, can you believe it? After crying for a while, I asked him: What did he see in me? He told me that he loved my form when I was running, but I knew I might never again be able to run like I had before."

In sports, a serious injury can make it quite difficult to make a comeback, Chitose explained.

Even supposing that she received flawless medical treatment, her muscle strength would decline due to the gap in her training. It wasn't clear whether she would be able to run like she had originally, and even if she did, it would take even more time.

Thinking realistically, it made sense that she would be removed from the team roster while she was recovering, but from Chitose's perspective, it had been a big enough shock that she'd felt as if she had lost her place in the world.

But the expression that Chitose wore as she told the story could hardly be called gloomy.

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Far from it, the look in her eyes was one of nostalgia, mixed with what could only be described as tender affection.

"Then Ikkun said, 'It doesn't matter. I love what I love.' He was so darn direct and honest, I stopped crying before I knew it."

"…He's very passionate."

"Well, if he didn't really like me, he would never have approached me after I brushed him off, right? Ikkun's bad at giving up when it comes to things like that. Honestly, he's so straightforward and serious… Ultimately, I guess you could say I was moved by his affection. When he said that he loved me so earnestly, it didn't feel weird at all, and I guess that must be why."

Chitose scratched her cheek awkwardly, then brushed back the hair that was hanging over her face and slowly cast her eyes downward.

"So like I told you, in the beginning it wasn't pure love like what you have for Amane. If you want to put it in a mean way, I was just swept off my feet and accepted it. Of course now I'm totally in love with him… Do you look down on me for it?"

"No… The path to romance is different for every person, and love takes many forms. No matter what started it, as long as you and Itsuki are in love with each other now and cherish each other, I think that's great."

To Mahiru, relationships were connections that bound together people who loved one another, and she thought that people's fates could not be linked by one-sided affection.

But she also knew that that was not all there was to it.

Chitose had left out the details of how she and Itsuki had connected in the way she told her story, but Mahiru could tell they had taken a different path than the way she imagined most couples were formed.

Mahiru had no intention of invalidating her friend's experience and accepted it for what it was.

The most important thing to her was whether Chitose was happier now than she had been in the past.

When Mahiru slowly shook her head, Chitose smiled slightly, looking relieved, then casually turned over to face the ceiling and extended her arms. She slowly clasped her palms together in the air, as if there were something between them.

"…After I quit the track club, I tried to change myself. I decided to learn more about the big wide world, not just running. I gained worldly wisdom. It was out of

self-interest, but people have a better impression of you if you're smiling, and they're kinder, so that's how I made friends. I had been paying the price for neglecting my relationships with other people, so I tried extra hard."

She turned a touching gaze on Mahiru, a gaze that seemed to say *I'm sure you understand perfectly well what that's like, Mahirun.*

"Well, anyway, that's the story of how me and Ikkun got to where we are today. Not really the nicest story, right?"

"…Setting aside the question of whether or not it was pleasant, I'm a little surprised to hear that Akazawa-san was so persistent."

"Heh-heh-heh. I may have changed a lot, but Ikkun's also changed, you know? Thanks to his family's education plan, he used to be way too serious, if anything—a real model student. Though you've seen what he's become, now that he's mixed up with someone like me."

"…You shouldn't put yourself down like that."

"This is one point I won't budge on… It's only natural that Daiki-san would hate me, you know, considering how the serious son he raised so carefully ended up changing after meeting me," Chitose mumbled quietly, her words probably not meant for Mahiru to hear. Her voice had a faint, sad tremble to it.

Mahiru had picked up on the fact that there was a gulf between Chitose and Itsuki's father, but it seemed to be deeper than she had assumed.

As an outsider, Mahiru couldn't readily fill in that gulf or build a bridge across it.

But what she could do was snuggle up to her friend.

Mahiru gently brought her body closer, until she could no longer see Chitose's face, and put her forehead against the other girl's arm.

"…Well, I like you, Chitose-san," she whispered quietly.

The body she was holding on to shook just a little.

"Eh-heh-heh, thanks. I like you, too, Mahirun."

In a sort of embrace, Chitose curled up against Mahiru's chest, but just this once, Mahiru didn't prevent it and let Chitose do as she pleased.

"Oh-ho-ho, I'm the first person to enjoy Mahirun's softness."

"…Not necessarily—"

"Huh?! What's that mean, gimme details!"

"That's a secret."

"Oh, come on, that's not fair!"

They horsed around for a bit, and as she felt Chitose’s warmth seeping into her arms, Mahiru slowly closed her eyes.

Former Regrets and Hopes for the Future

These should do nicely.

Since his father always had something to say when Itsuki was home on days he didn't work his part-time job, Itsuki had decided to save himself the stress and go out, under the pretense of returning a comic book he had borrowed from Amane.

After getting some cream puffs from one of Chitose's favorite patisseries wrapped up to go as a present, he headed down the familiar road that took him to Amane's apartment building.

He'd made sure to tell Amane that morning that he was coming to return the book, so he assumed that his friend would be at home.

He entered the atrium and called up to Amane's unit with practiced motions, idly wondering what he should get Amane to loan him next, when he heard an unexpected voice on the intercom, and his body automatically straightened up.

"Is that Akazawa-san?"

...I guess it is lunchtime on a weekend?

I know she's been making them dinner in the evenings, so it's not so strange that she'd be there on a weekend afternoon.

He had heard directly from Amane that he sometimes spent his weekends with Mahiru, but the idea that she was actually there in Amane's apartment gave rise to some complicated, restless feelings.

"Oh, Shiina-san, hello. Is Amane in?"

"Hello. Amane-kun's gone out to run some errands and won't be back for about another hour. He said he needed to send something at the post office, then drop by the ATM and the stationery store."

"I see. All things he could have taken care of on a weekday… What a thoughtless guy."

"You're quite right. I heard from Amane-kun that you would be coming by, and he gave me permission to let you in, so please come on up."

Amane had been aware that Itsuki was going to visit, but he must have really wanted to get those errands done no matter what.

Itsuki would give him a good ribbing later for leaving Mahiru to handle his visitors, but for the time being, he decided to take Mahiru at her word and head up to the apartment.

"Welcome."

When he arrived at Amane's place, Mahiru welcomed him in as if it was only natural, with the same clear voice he had just heard over the intercom.

She looked like she was already Amane's live-in girlfriend or wife, and Itsuki couldn't help himself from quipping, "How can he not be sure if she's into him, that dummy," but he mumbled it in such a quiet voice that she couldn't hear him.

Mahiru looked confused at Itsuki, who had stiffened slightly. He smiled vaguely to disguise his awkwardness, and as he took off his shoes and put on the slippers that had been set out for him, he showed Mahiru the box of cream puffs that he was carrying in his arms along with the comic book.

"Thanks for having me. Ah, these are some cream puffs I got. There's enough in there for you, too, so eat them together, okay?"

Itsuki had bought enough for Mahiru, figuring that if Amane was eating dinner with Mahiru every day, then they would have time to eat them that evening, but he had never expected her to be there in the afternoon.

Mahiru accepted the box of cream puffs, and said bashfully, "I'm sure Amane-kun will be pleased," and gave a little bow. "Thank you, that's very kind. Wait here, please, and I'll bring out some tea. Do you drink black tea?"

"I'll drink anything. Thanks for your consideration."

"Not at all, you're an important guest. All right, then, wait just a minute, please."

After showing Itsuki to the living room sofa, Mahiru went into the kitchen with a gentle smile on her face.

She moved with such natural ease that Itsuki wasn't sure whether to be impressed or astonished.

He mentally launched more friendly abuse at Amane for being a loser who had made basically no progress despite having Mahiru so embedded in his life.

After Itsuki had been waiting a little while, Mahiru came back holding a tray on which she had placed two cups of tea and a plate with cream puffs on it.

She set the cream puffs in front of Itsuki, so she was probably planning to eat hers when Amane was there.

After serving Itsuki's tea with elegant movements, Mahiru seemed unsure of where to sit. Her gaze wandered around the room for a little bit, then she took a seat next to Itsuki, leaving a proper distance between them.

He was somewhat relieved, since it would have been unforgivable to let a girl sit on the floor, even on top of a rug, while he was sitting on the sofa. He smirked at the fact that she was sitting at the very edge, probably because she wasn't used to his presence.

Well, I guess that's fair. I don't know Shiina-san well enough for us to be on good or bad terms with each other.

Itsuki and Mahiru weren't especially close.

From Itsuki's perspective, she was his girlfriend's friend, and the girl his best friend loved, and he probably knew her better than most other people, but he hadn't been in close contact with her like Chitose or Amane.

Until now, they had hardly ever been alone together like this, so he felt unspeakably awkward.

He glanced over at her and saw her sipping her tea with a composed expression. He knew she was probably feeling awkward as well, but she didn't show it.

"Sorry for taking advantage of your hospitality, after showing up so suddenly."

"No, like you said earlier, it's Amane-kun's fault for remembering those things he had to do at the last minute. I think he'll be back soon, but sorry for making you wait."

Mahiru bobbed her head, and Itsuki chuckled in spite of himself.

He knew that she probably wasn't aware of it herself and that she didn't mean to give this impression, but her actions and words were just like those of a wife apologizing for her husband's absence. She must have spent so much time by Amane's side that they came naturally to her.

"You don't need to worry about me; I did only tell him I was coming today, after all. At any rate…you really are over at Amane's place, huh?" Itsuki commented quietly.

Mahiru flinched slightly, and then her cheeks flushed a faint crimson, and she drew her shoulders in.

"Um… I suppose you're wondering who I think I am. I must seem like I'm forcing things…"

“I wasn’t trying to criticize you. I just think it’s nice that the two of you have gotten to the point where it’s normal. It’s very charming.”

He got the sense that both Amane and Mahiru felt like it was natural to be together, and as someone who was watching their romance develop, he thought that it was sweet.

There had been no major developments after several months of these two high schoolers spending time alone together, but now he could glimpse an opening in their caution and trepidation, which was all the more charming. Though he did feel that the reason why they hadn’t progressed was mainly because Amane hadn’t pushed for it.

“Amane has really mellowed out since he started spending time with you, and I think that must be thanks to your influence.”

“I-is that so? That’s wonderful.”

“I mean, when you met, Amane was cold and kind of a downer; honestly, he was pretty unfriendly. He seemed really distant and gloomy, so I think it’s a mark of progress that he’s expressing his feelings more and showing people his mellow smile.”

When Itsuki thought about the fact that it had been Mahiru who brought that out in Amane, instead of him, he felt a lump of discomfort form in his chest. But it soon disappeared when he reminded himself that as long as Amane was happy, that was what mattered. Itsuki earnestly felt that the change had done his friend good.

Mahiru, who had been listening quietly, glanced up at him with a serious look in her eyes.

“…Can I ask you something that I’ve been curious about?”

“As long as it’s something I can answer, ask away.”

“…Well, I’ve been wondering how you and Amane-kun came to be friends,” she said falteringly, after some hesitation.

Itsuki responded with a gentle smile.

“You’re curious?”

“…Well, yes, I am. I feel like Amane-kun is the type who is very wary of others, so I was thinking that there might have been some impetus that brought you together.”

“Is this because you want to know everything about the guy you like?”

“…I mean, if I thought that asking would make Amane-kun uncomfortable, I would refrain, but…before, when I asked him, he told me that you were already friends before he realized it, so I was curious. Because Amane-kun himself said he didn’t know why you became friends with him.”

“Ah, I guess that means Amane doesn’t remember. Actually, I think it’s more like he doesn’t realize that he knows.”

When Itsuki had spoken to Amane at the start of school, he seemed to have completely forgotten about the past, so Amane probably had no idea why Itsuki had wanted to be his friend.

So that was why he didn’t have a clue what had kicked off their friendship.

Mahiru stared at Itsuki inquisitively as he pondered how to explain things to her. He started by asking her a question.

“Say, Shiina-san, if I put on glasses and made a gloomy face, would you recognize me? Suppose you saw me several months after talking to me only once, and only just a little.”

“…Well, that would depend on the situation.”

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s because I bet you are very observant when it comes to other people. Amane didn’t recognize me, you see, because I also had a much tamer haircut and everything than I do now.”

They say it’s easy to judge a person by their outward appearance, and Itsuki agreed with that. He thought that when he really looked at someone, he noticed their physical features, of course. But their style and the way they wore their hair also made a strong impression.

If a girl he knew quite well suddenly cut her hair very short, it would naturally take him a moment to recognize her. When the impression someone gives changes entirely, it takes time for everyone’s brains to sync them with the person that they know.

So he figured that if a person he met only once and only for a short time completely changed their look, he couldn’t help but think of them as a different person.

“Before we started high school, we had that school tour trip, remember? That’s where Amane and me first met.”

The reason that Itsuki felt both nostalgia and anxiety when he thought back on that time was because he had been going through some emotional turmoil back then. Thinking about it dredged up some difficult memories.

All the more so because it was a friction that had still not been resolved.

“Back then, see, I was in a bad way. I was constantly fighting with my dad about Chi, and he had all sorts of things to say about my lineage and my future, so I was really stressed out. He was telling me not to go to school here, but to attend a prep school that had stricter regulations, and other stuff like that.”

Even Itsuki could understand his father's feelings on the subject.

Dating Chitose had already caused one rift in their relationship. Itsuki knew that his father didn't want to fight about anything else and that he was trying to keep ahold of his son.

If pushed to say, Itsuki would admit that his father cared about him, but that care had always been colored by a strong desire to see his son follow his ideals.

His father had tried to be a good parent, and so he had been very strict with Itsuki. He wanted Itsuki to be an upright, moral person and to make the family proud.

Itsuki could understand his father's feelings. But spending so long trying to live up to his parents' expectations had inevitably made Itsuki depressed.

And Mother was off on her own, either at her studio or getting ready for some exhibition, so she was busy and didn't have much to do with me.

Itsuki understood that his father had carefully raised him to recognize that his mother had a job of her own and that she was very good at it. He was grateful for the fact that he had been raised with a proper appreciation of the work that went into running a household.

Even still, he had been in middle school when his pent-up frustrations had exploded, and he had yelled at his father that he was not some kind of remote-controlled toy.

"My head always hurt, and I was really unsteady on my feet. Then, at a moment like that, I had to go on the trip alone, on a different schedule from Chi and Yuuta."

Seeking a period of time away from his parents, Itsuki had applied for a multiday observation tour of his future high school. But his schedule hadn't matched up with his friends', Chitose and Yuuta, so he had ended up participating alone.

That had not gone well.

"Well, somehow I joined the tour without letting anything show, but halfway through the day, things got tough, and I crouched down and said 'Toilet' with no further explanation. Then Amane ran after me and helped take care of me."

Middle schooler Itsuki had slipped away from the group, saying he was going to the bathroom alone. He had looked awfully unwell, so Amane had followed him despite not even knowing the other boy's name. He must have been quite the busybody.

"…Are you sick?

"You don't seem to have a fever… Wait here a minute. I'll go buy you something to drink. I saw a vending machine while we were walking around.

“Here. Is water okay? Do you have medicine?

“If you’re not well, you should leave early and go home, or go to one of the high school teachers and get them to let you rest in the health room for a while. You might collapse if you continue the tour in this condition.

“I’m gonna go get a teacher, you wait there.”

Itsuki was grateful to Amane, who was so worried that he looked after Itsuki, even knowing that the faculty would get angry at him for wandering around the school without permission. Later, Itsuki felt guilty for getting Amane in trouble.

Itsuki had waited for him to come back so that he could apologize, but a teacher had shown up instead and told him that *“Amane was allowed to go back to the information session.”*

After that, Itsuki was allowed to rest in the health room for a while, and ultimately the school tour ended without him seeing Amane again or getting the chance to thank him.

“And, well, that’s about the whole story. I guess he didn’t even remember it; he didn’t seem to think he was doing anything major. Even so, I’m still grateful to him.”

Itsuki had calmly left the tour, trying his best not to let anything show on his face, so he didn’t think anyone had noticed his distress.

He had never imagined that Amane would follow him, a complete stranger, down the stairs.

“We started high school, and my appearance was all different, but Amane hadn’t changed a bit. We happened to be in the same class, and I went up to talk to him, but he really didn’t remember me at all! That made me laugh.”

He couldn’t really blame Amane for that.

Itsuki’s appearance had gotten much more cheerful after he entered high school.

His behavior was more easygoing, and he was trying to break free of the honor student mold that his father wanted him to fit.

Once he was feeling more like himself, he could see that striving to be an honor student had been stifling and painful. He was grateful that he had broken out of his cage with Chitose before he suffocated.

He felt some regret that he had ever fettered the free bird inside of him.

“Well, he was the only one who was concerned about me, and I knew that he was a good guy, so I hung around with him, and one way or another, we wound up being friends… I guess that about sums it up.”

“…Amane-kun is a pretty empathetic person.”

“I agree… That’s why, you see, I’ve been sort of vigilant when it comes to you.”

“…To make sure I’m not tricking or manipulating or hurting the kindhearted Amane-kun, you mean?”

Mahiru seemed to immediately understand what Itsuki was trying to say. She didn’t seem surprised, she just stared at him with calm eyes.

Glad that the matter was settled quickly, Itsuki smiled, deliberately not answering her question, then shrugged a little.

“Well, normally, I think people would be worried about you instead, but from where I’m standing, I was more worried about my often-misunderstood friend than about a popular person I hardly knew.”

To Itsuki, up until the day of their Christmas Eve party, he had seen the person known as Mahiru Shiina as a flawless superwoman, a graceful beauty beyond reproach.

Nothing more, and nothing less.

In other words, to Itsuki, who had never had anything to do with her, Mahiru’s personality was an unknown factor, and she was a stranger who wielded a lot of influence.

What if, behind that beautiful smile, she was playing some sort of cruel game?

Itsuki, who had been tormented by malicious rumors before, was skeptical of any hearsay that spread among the student body.

Even Mahiru, who seemed to be such a beautiful and virtuous person that people called her an angel, was just someone else to be suspicious of.

The revelation of his mistrust did not seem to upset Mahiru.

“…I think that was a sensible conclusion to reach. Honestly, if I had been a friend in Amane-kun’s corner, I probably also would have thought it was a little suspicious and wondered if I had some kind of ulterior motive.”

“I mean, if you think about it, it’s hard to imagine what you would gain by associating with Amane, you know? If anything, I would think it would be more trouble than it was worth. So I just had to determine whether you were looking to get anything out of talking to him.”

“As well you should have.”

“Anyway, it didn’t take long for me to find out that you were just some girl who liked Amane, so now I don’t have any worries about that, and actually, I’m hoping that you might spur him on.”

At this stage, Itsuki knew that Mahiru was just a girl who appreciated Amane's personality and had fallen in love with him, so there was nothing for him to worry about.

Instead, he was worried about Mahiru—worried she might be getting impatient because Amane was such a good-for-nothing.

Mahiru looked embarrassed when he said that she was a girl who liked Amane. She pressed her lips together and hugged a pillow, so even as he smiled modestly, thinking he had teased her too much, Itsuki resolved to go ahead and tell her all sorts of things while Amane wasn't around.

"It's like this: Amane's an extreme pushover. And he's ridiculously vulnerable to pressure from you, Shiina-san, so you should just go for it; don't hesitate."

"Y-you say that, but…I'm already trying my best on a daily basis."

"Mm, I believe I can see that even as a third party, but, well… So listen, Amane's…how do I put this, he's a huge wuss, the type of person who can't really accept affection from other people."

"…He sure is," Mahiru agreed with a somewhat faraway look.

Itsuki hoped that was a good sign.

"Must be difficult."

"Eh-heh. But even these hardships are part of the pleasure of love, no?"

"I guess you're right. I suffered too when I was young, and you know, now…I wouldn't say it was a good thing, but it's something I can look back and laugh about."

It was less of a laugh and more of a bitter smile, but even so, Itsuki and Chitose had made it through those days together, and he wouldn't throw away those memories. He had them tucked deep in his heart as nostalgic reminiscences.

He was waiting for Mahiru to laugh and tell him he was still young, but she seemed sort of unsure how to answer and put on a vague smile.

From her complicated response, he guessed that she might have heard something from Chitose.

"You heard from Chi?"

When Itsuki dropped his smile and quietly asked the question, Mahiru nodded.

"…Just a little," she replied, also quietly. "About Chitose-san quitting the track club and how you started dating."

"Is that so? Well, what'd you think of me?"

What does she think about me confessing directly to Chi's face without understanding the situation I was creating and how as a result Chi was harassed by an upperclassman in her club?

Strictly speaking, the envy that the other girl had toward Chitose had just flared up because of Itsuki's confession of love, but even so, he had been the one who added fuel to the fire.

If only he had played his cards a little better, maybe Chitose could have dated Itsuki without getting attacked by the upperclassman, and she could have continued to be part of the track club. If that had happened, the coach might have written her a recommendation to get her into a high school with a strong track team. Her whole life path would have been different.

"…It's not my place to say anything. If I take one wrong step, I'll wind up bearing the same regrets as you do."

"You don't have to worry about that. You're many times more careful than I am, and you know how to play your cards well."

Mahiru seemed better able to pick up on things like that and more proficient at laying the groundwork—as she was slowly, bit by bit, closing the distance between her and Amane at school—so that she didn't upset anyone.

If Itsuki had been considerate like her, Chitose might not have been injured, and Yuuta, who had witnessed the whole ordeal, might not have become so cautious around girls.

It was too late for all that; there was no way to change it.

"But know that I'll probably hate you if this situation ends up hurting Amane deeply. Though I know I don't have room to talk, as the person who ruined Chi's future opportunities."

"In that case, I would expect to be hated. No one would be happy if their dear friend got hurt… I would hate you, too, if you ever did something that caused Amane-kun or Chitose-san pain."

"Ha-ha, glad to hear it… I guess there would be no avoiding it."

He was relieved to hear that she would hate him for that, probably because he'd had so many friends who'd tried to make excuses for his actions.

The people around him had told him that the incident he had caused was not his fault, that he wasn't to blame—they'd been kind, but he had always regretted his actions. He had always secretly worried about whether he was really at fault and whether Chitose actually resented him for it on some level.

So he was delighted to have someone who would directly put those worries to bed, even though the hypotheticals still plagued his mind.

And he thought it was great to have someone around who would tell him off properly, someone who had Chitose's and Amane's best interests in mind.

"…I know this is forward of me, and it's only my personal opinion, but Chitose-san chooses to be with you, and I don't think she has any regrets. She's always talking about you, and she seems so happy… Wouldn't it be best to sit down and talk about it together?"

Itsuki was wearing a bitter smile. Mahiru gave him a gentle look and murmured, "Occasionally, the two of you both hold back from each other, you know?"

Her words made him feel strangely warm and kind of embarrassed. Still, his stiff expression softened.

"…Thank goodness that the two of them have you for a friend, Shiina-san," Itsuki mumbled, feeling keenly that Amane had good judgment when it came to people.

Mahiru heard what he said and blinked several times in surprise.

"Sorry, sorry, it must bother you when I call you his friend, since you're actually Amane's future girlfriend."

"Th-that's not what I meant!"

Mahiru glared at him as if to chide him for even saying such a thing. Her eyes filled up with tears of embarrassment, and her face turned bright red. Itsuki heedlessly burst into laughter.

He wondered why Amane didn't try a little harder to push things along, especially when it was so easy to tell how Mahiru felt. Amane liked her enough that the people around him noticed it, so if he just pushed a little more…

Even so, the way things are now is just what I would expect from the two of them, so it's probably just right.

As Itsuki was musing that his friend still had quite a ways to go on the pathway to love, the sound of a key turning in a lock came from the entryway.

Speak of the devil, and he appears.

Maybe because she couldn't bear to sit there any longer, Mahiru immediately stood up and trotted to the front door, as if to escape from Itsuki.

"I'm back. Did Itsuki show up?"

"Welcome home. He's been here quite a while already."

Their voices got closer as they moved in from the entryway. Amane appeared, holding a paper bag from a stationery store where he had apparently stopped off along the way, and frowned apologetically.

"Crap…sorry, Itsuki."

“It’s fine, it’s fine, I was able to have a nice leisurely conversation with Shiina-san. Ain’t that right, Shiina-san?”

“Eh-he-he, that’s right.”

We never could have had that kind of conversation with Amane around.

Thinking about it that way, Amane’s sudden errands weren’t a bad thing.

“…What did you talk about?”

“Oh, are you jealous, mister?”

“Idiot, as if.”

Amane answered with a little irritation in his voice, and Mahiru frowned ever so slightly, but Itsuki was probably the only one who noticed.

I bet Shiina-san would be happy if he honestly admitted he was jealous.

Itsuki realized that it was unreasonable to expect any more, knowing as he did that Amane was bashful and never up-front about his feelings, but he always got irritated watching his friend, who seemed unable to take even a single step forward.

“…Seriously, what did you talk about?”

“Now, what was it? That’s our secret.”

Either because of Amane’s reaction or because he had never planned to tell him from the start, Itsuki declared their conversation a secret in a lively, somewhat mischievous voice, placing his index finger against his mouth.

His expression made Amane look all the more suspicious, but Mahiru deliberately pretended not to know anything.

“Oh-ho, don’t get sulky, please… Let’s just say it was interesting stories about you. How’s that?” she said.

“That’s a total lie, and even if it wasn’t, Itsuki’s the last guy I want telling you stories!”

“I wonder… Oh, and Akazawa-san brought us some cream puffs.”

“…I won’t let you dodge the question.”

“You don’t want any cream puffs?”

“Of course I do!”

Amane seemed hungry for cream puffs. He fixed Mahiru with a stare, but she maintained her beautiful smile the whole time as she gave Amane a little shove and sent him off toward the sink.

“If you want to eat cream puffs, then hurry up and go wash your hands, please.”

“…I’ll get you to tell me later.”

“You can go right ahead and try. Now, would you rather have coffee or tea?”

“…Coffee, please.”

“Got it. Okay, off you go.”

Itsuki met Mahiru’s eyes after she deftly chased Amane off to the sink with a beaming bright smile.

“…You two are meant for each other, for real,” he mumbled in spite of himself.

Mahiru’s eyes went wide, as if she had only just remembered that he was there, then she visibly withdrew and pleaded quietly, “Please forget that you saw that.”

Wearing his biggest smile yet that day, Itsuki shrugged.

That Voice Is Against the Rules

Mahiru had fallen in love with a guy who was cautious, shy, and meek.

She couldn't say he was all that friendly, and he did adopt a curt attitude toward unfamiliar people, but he wasn't exactly what she would call cold. He could be considerate, and his disposition was naturally gentle.

Once he got to know someone, he listened to them with a calm expression on his face and showed them his soft smile.

Once someone formed a deep friendship with him, it became clear that although he was not very good at making conversation, he was considerate and very thoughtful, a gentlemanly sort of person.

…Too gentlemanly. Whenever Mahiru physically closed the distance between them, he opened it back up, and before she could get his attention, he moved away. It was causing Mahiru some consternation.

What can I do to get Amane-kun to be more aware of me?

Before she could get him to love her, she had to get him to see her, but she wasn't sure how to do that.

The easiest and quickest way would probably be to wear something revealing to seize his attention, but common sense and propriety convinced her she would immediately be rejected if she tried something like that.

Recklessly exposing so much skin was naturally something Mahiru had never done, and she knew that Amane wouldn't even be able to look her in the eye if she was dressed like that. Plus, if things went poorly, it might even ruin his image of her.

She'd considered trying to be clingier, but she was certain that would only make Amane pull away from her.

He didn't mind if their hands or shoulders touched a little bit. But the moment their bodies came in contact, he always casually put space between them or informed her in an uneasy voice, "You're touching me."

Mahiru also thought that an approach like that was too pushy and was vulgar to boot. She got embarrassed just thinking about it and rejected the idea in the end.

So how can I get his attention?

"What about creeping into his room at night?"

"Have you been listening? I can't just barge into a guy's bedroom and attack him while he's asleep. Not only is it bad manners, it's trespassing!"

Mahiru had given Chitose the basics and asked for her advice. When she got that unthinkable response, Mahiru narrowed her eyes and glared at her friend in spite of herself.

She did feel bad about taking up Chitose's time after school to ask her about all this. But Chitose's advice was much too forward. There was no way Mahiru could do something like that.

Chitose didn't seem intimidated by Mahiru's chilly gaze. She stirred the café au lait she had ordered with a stirring stick and laughed quietly.

"Come on, you know I was joking. But listen, I've said it before: With that type of guy, I think it's going to be hard to develop the kind of relationship you're after unless you really push things along."

"Th-that's—"

"I mean, he hasn't done a thing, has he? Despite having such a charming, cute girl by his side, diligently looking after him and treating him with so much care and affection. Like, is he even a man? Is his thing attached right? Is it working? Makes me wonder…"

"I'll thank you to refrain from such talk. Geez."

Even though Mahiru knew that there weren't any other students from their school in the café, since she had checked to see if there were any people in the nearby seats, remarks like that could be quite risky.

Even if she turned down the volume, the things Chitose was saying would have been really awful for someone to overhear. That put Mahiru on edge and made her feel embarrassed.

For better or for worse, Chitose had an unreserved quality to her, and when it was just the two girls, she often made very lively remarks without any reservation. Mahiru often had to work hard not to give her disapproving looks.

Mahiru's cheeks flushed when Chitose mentioned a particular thing that she rarely thought about, and Chitose looked even more amused.

...She's right, though: Amane-kun has never once behaved that way toward me.

Even when they were alone together in private, he hadn't made any such moves.

Mahiru had assumed that he was just being careful, but she wondered if that was really the case. She tried hard to put the uninvited thought out of her mind.

Mahiru softly cleared her throat. She attempted to pull herself together, but even so, once the thought had crossed her mind, she couldn't let it go.

"But really, Amane's not very eager. If anything, he's too gentlemanly, right? He's the kinda guy who'll stay a respectful distance. Normally, I'd say it wouldn't surprise me if he had some sort of ulterior motive. That's why I've got my doubts about him being a real man."

"Chitose-san…"

"Geez, sorry. Look, the one thing I wanna say is that since he's so rational, since he's the type not to act on any feelings he might have, if you keep doing what you're doing, you're never going to get closer to him, okay? If you want him to notice you, you've got to be the one to make it happen."

Mahiru knew that perfectly well already. But she didn't know what she was supposed to do. She had already tried everything she could think of.

"…Well, you're you, and you're having an effect on Amane without him even knowing, I'm sure. He just hasn't noticed yet. And Amane's a disaster. I don't know how you put up with him," Chitose muttered in a low voice.

"What is it that I've done?"

Mahiru probed her gently for the meaning of her statements.

"Been so darn cute!"

Chitose didn't seem inclined to explain any further and laughed as she evaded the question.

Mahiru knew that when she got like this, Chitose would stubbornly refuse to talk, so Mahiru quickly gave up on getting any more information out of her and sighed softly.

...So then what should I do?

She had seen for herself that Amane wasn't completely indifferent to her.

She got to see the kind, sweet expressions that he never showed to anyone else, and she knew that he was always courteous and honorable toward her.

She also knew that he thought she was something special, more than anyone else did.

At the very least, he liked her as a person, and it was a bit of wishful thinking on Mahiru's part, but she thought that he liked her as a member of the opposite sex as well.

If not, he probably wouldn't have opened up to her, and surely he wouldn't be spoiling Mahiru and letting her spoil him.

"How do I put this…? Mahirun, you and Amane are both cruel people in your own ways. Anyway, I think you should keep trying and really pour on the pressure."

"Pressure… So for example, Chitose-san, um, when you're with Akazawa-san, how do you spend your time together?"

"Huh? I don't think knowing that will help you."

If Chitose was going to be that forward, then Mahiru wanted to hear how she spent time with her boyfriend, as an example. But Chitose waved her hand a few times with a loose smile on her face.

"With Ikkun, you know, we make out and stuff."

"M-make out…"

"When we get some time together, well, we either go out or we have a stay-at-home date. But in your case, you're limited to staying at home, I guess. Hmm, when we're at home, we do stuff like snuggle up and watch a DVD, or read comics, or play a game, or have rambling conversations. You know, that sort of thing. And also, if no one else is in the house, we, well, you know?"

"G-got it, okay! You don't need to give me all the details!"

"What? I haven't even really said what it is we do yet…but what were you imagining, I wonder?"

"……"

"Sorry, sorry. Well, we cuddle and kiss, and all sorts of things on top of that, but there's no way you can do that, right, Mahirun? Of course, if you did, I would applaud your courage!"

"I—I won't! I can't!"

If they even tried to kiss, they wouldn't be able to so much as look each other in the eye. After all, kissing, and everything that came after it, was usually something people did once they were already dating, not a method for catching someone's attention.

Mahiru glared daggers at Chitose, wondering how she could even suggest such a thing, but Chitose brushed it off with a smile, completely unbothered.

“Right, that’s why my experience won’t be of any use to you. The wholesome kind of appeal that you want to make is best done with the things you’re already always doing, you see?”

“…Huh?”

“Boys get excited if you so much as smile at them, and you’re already so close to Amane, I bet you touch a lot. You’re holding hands like it’s nothing, and you sit next to each other to read books together or play games, so you’re already making your move.”

“Th-that’s—”

“And you eat dinner together almost every day, and smile at each other while you talk, and spend time snuggled up together like it’s the most natural thing in the world, so I’d say your efforts to attract him have already been quite… Well, from the sidelines, you already look like a pair of newlyweds. You’re close enough to make people wonder.”

Chitose grinned as she watched Mahiru’s reaction, and Mahiru opened and closed her mouth wordlessly several times, her bottom lip trembling.

She tried to object, but what emerged from the back of her throat was just a soft groan that did not amount to any words.

…Newlyweds, she said?

Mahiru had certainly not been thinking about that when she spent time with Amane. She had been sure that the two of them had a normal relationship.

Helping to look after someone was in Mahiru’s nature, and she sat beside Amane because the sofa was the only place to sit. She was at his place until later in the evening because they were finishing their homework together or having lively conversations. Of course, the strongest reason for her to spend time with Amane was that she wanted to be close to him. But now she was being forced to think about how their conduct must look to anyone else. A groan escaped her lips.

“You’re telling me it was unintentional?” Chitose asked. “Well, all the people who already know that you two are hanging out together probably figured as much, so it’s fine, don’t worry.”

“That’s not fine at all!”

“Mahirun, you’re shouting.”

Chitose was laughing, her eyes squinted up as if to rebuke Mahiru for raising her voice in response to the uncalled-for additional information. Mahiru glared at her a little, feeling regret that she had forgotten herself for a second.

Chitose gave her a satisfied smile and reassured her, “Relax, all we can tell from the sidelines is that you have good chemistry.” From the encouraging way she said it, Mahiru couldn’t tell whether she should or shouldn’t relax.

“Anyway, the two of you get along so well you give newlyweds *and* longtime couples a run for their money. But at this point, I wonder if maybe you should consider giving indirect contact a try?”

“…Indirect?”

“You’ve tried everything that’s socially acceptable, but you still want Amane to notice you, right? So you gotta change up your strategy. People can get used to anything if you do it enough. Normally, you smile at him and snuggle up to him, and you’re already plying him with food, right? So next time, try attacking with your voice, I think.”

“…My voice?”

“That’s right. Why don’t you call him right before bed? A good-night call isn’t just for chitchat. He doesn’t usually hear your voice at bedtime, and it’s like you’re slipping into his private space, so it’ll set his heart thumping. It’ll feel all the more exciting because you’re not there in front of him.”

Chitose assured her that it worked even for people who were already dating, turning her gaze slightly upward with a bashful look as if she was remembering something. Even to another girl, she looked extraordinarily cute.

…She’s right, I almost never call him, so it will probably be a new experience.

Usually, Amane was right beside her when she wanted to talk to him, so they heard each other directly. Sometimes, they corresponded through notes. But phone calls were a method of communication that had naturally fallen out of use for them, so there could be something novel in the experience.

Besides, being able to hear Amane’s voice right before sleeping had its own appeal for Mahiru. If it meant that she could hear her beloved’s voice and go to bed feeling content, then she had to give it a try.

“…In that case, um, I-I’ll try my best,” Mahiru said timidly.

Chitose made a delighted gasp, and her eyes lit up.

“So before bed, I’ll try talking to him. We’ll talk about our day, and anything fun that happened, and our plans for the next day… Sharing a conversation will be good, I think.”

“…That sounds so like you, Mahirun.”

Mahiru announced her decision with grave earnestness, but Chitose’s smile transformed into something softer.

“Why do you look so pleased?”

“Because you’re so adorable.”

“You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?”

“No way, no how!”

“Good grief.”

Chitose gave a sarcastic response, and Mahiru shot her a reproachful look, but Chitose smiled and murmured quietly, “So cute,” as if she were watching a child.

That made Mahiru very uncomfortable. All she wanted to do was to get Chitose to stop looking at her like that.

“Man, you’re really cute! Girls in love are always cute, you know. And you’re even more adorable because of how devoted and pure you are.”

“…So you’re saying you find my feelings amusing?”

“You’re imagining things. It’s just your imagination.”

Chitose was grinning even as she told Mahiru she was imagining things, so Mahiru pouted a little and then turned away in a huff.

After that, Mahiru parted from Chitose and went back to her apartment. Then, after changing clothes, she headed over to Amane’s place, feeling enthusiastic about trying out a good-night phone call.

She used her spare key, as was now the norm for her, and passed through the entryway. Amane popped out suddenly from the kitchen, evidently alerted to her presence by the sound of the door unlocking, and said, “Welcome home.”

She had told Amane ahead of time that she was going to be a little late and had asked him to cook the rice, so there was nothing strange about it, but in spite of herself, Mahiru froze when she saw him in his apron.

Amane often helped out with the housework, so she ought to have been used to seeing him in his apron, but she felt a strange sort of embarrassment when he greeted her so naturally, with a gentle look in his eyes.

…Greeting me like that, it’s like we’re a couple or something.

Her earlier conversation with Chitose was probably having an effect on her.

She felt ashamed for imagining such a thing when they weren’t even dating yet, but nevertheless, a smile slowly crept across her face.

“I—I just got back.”

She immediately composed her expression, but it was impossible to hide the agitation in her shrill voice. This drew a puzzled response from Amane.

“Is something the matter?”

“N-no, um, you just don’t often greet me in your apron, so it’s kind of novel, is all.”

“Ah, that’s what it is. I guess it’s usually the other way around, huh? Since you don’t usually come back very late.”

Amane readily accepted her somewhat forced explanation and smiled a little.

“Well, as you can see, I went ahead and started the dinner preparations, but I was just thinking I should have gone out to meet you after all. I’m sure it was kind of dark on the walk back,” Amane said, then glanced at the living room clock for a moment and frowned.

Mahiru shook her head slowly.

Sure, the sun had already set by the time she headed home at six o’clock, but it wasn’t as though the curtain of night had completely fallen. It was a perfectly normal time for a high school student to be returning home.

“There was still plenty of foot traffic, and it was still relatively light outside. Plus, I would have taken a taxi if the sun had completely set and the road looked dangerous.”

“That’s all very good, but you know I would come meet you if you called me, right? You can count on me.”

“T-taking advantage of you like that—”

“Come on, stop. If I’m around, I want you to take advantage of me. Although I may not be the most reliable.”

“…You are very reliable.”

“Oh, really?”

Amane was smiling just a little awkwardly, perhaps because he thought of himself as unreliable. But from Mahiru’s perspective, he was more than dependable. More than anyone else, out of all the people she knew.

Maybe the results of all his training were starting to show, because it was clear that his physique was shaping up bit by bit. Once he had had a bit of a tendency to hunch over, but now his posture had improved, almost as a manifestation of his newfound confidence. He was stooping forward a bit at the moment to meet Mahiru’s gaze, but his eyes were earnestly kind and full of concern for her well-being. She felt her chest gradually growing warm.

“I, um, I always rely on you.”

“I’m the one who’s always relying on you, so you should at least lean on me in cases like this.”

Amane put on a faint smile, extended an arm that looked a little more muscular than before, and gently patted her on the head.

Normally, he didn't touch her without a good reason, and yet at times like this, he did so quite naturally. Mahiru had slightly complicated feelings about it.

She knew he probably wasn't really aware of it, but as the person on the receiving end, on the one hand, it felt nice and made her happy, but on the other, it was embarrassing and made her worry that she was the only one who felt something between them.

...At times like this, he treats me like a little child.

However, she didn't entirely dislike that.

Actually, far from disliking it, she wanted him to do it more, but that wasn't something that she could just ask for, so all she could do was appreciate it when Amane did touch her.

As she tried to hold her inexpressible emotions in check, Mahiru gave Amane a look that was ever so slightly reproachful, and he blinked dramatically in surprise.

"I washed my hands earlier, and I'll do it again before we start cooking, okay?"

"…I'm not worried about something like that, geez."

It was probably impossible for Mahiru to tell him precisely how she was feeling, and she didn't necessarily want him to know anyway.

But since it would have been unfair for her to be the only one with a pounding heart, she rubbed her head against Amane's chest for a moment.

She could hear him getting flustered, but Mahiru pretended not to notice and made the most of the situation. Amane's sounds of agitation gradually transformed into gentle, permissive noises of resignation.

Mahiru knew that those sounds were for her ears only, and her mouth automatically curled into a gentle smile.

But since there was no way she could possibly let Amane see her sappy grin, after enjoying the feeling of his fingers in her hair for a little longer, she put on a relaxed expression and raised her head.

Leaving his hand on her head, Amane looked down at her with a slight flush on his face. His clear, dark eyes were wavering slightly, revealing his unrest.

When Mahiru smiled with a little bit of satisfaction at his expression, Amane brushed his hair back lightly, as if he was stroking his own head, and let out a sigh.

"…I'm gonna get back to cooking."

He's running away.

That's what she thought, but she didn't say a thing. She thought that if she did, Amane would become sulky. Mahiru tried to follow Amane into the kitchen, but he lightly caught hold of her shoulders and stopped her.

"You just relax in the living room, Mahiru."

"…I can help."

"Today's my day to cook. If you came all the way over here to relax, then you should actually relax. The menu isn't that challenging. Plus, you're always making food for me."

"…And you're always helping me in the kitchen, aren't you, Amane-kun?"

"But you take the lead, since I'm not good for much. Our labor isn't comparable. Now, come on and leave it to me. Think of it as letting me practice."

His voice was gentle and tender but had a strange compelling power to it that wasn't going to let her refuse. Shrinking back, she tried to continue objecting, but Amane just leisurely shook his head and wouldn't let her enter the kitchen.

"Are you that worried about me cooking alone?"

"That's not it, but it just doesn't feel right having you do everything…"

"Well, then maybe you could help set the table."

Amane seemed adamant about refusing to let her help with the cooking. In lieu of complaining, Mahiru butted her head against his upper arm, and Amane put on a somewhat mischievous smile and rubbed her head again.

Ultimately, Mahiru ended up leaving the whole process of cooking up to Amane, but perhaps not unexpectedly, she was anxious about Amane and waited restlessly in the living room.

She knew perfectly well that Amane was more or less capable of cooking decently, but her concerns were her concerns.

As she uneasily watched a television program, she also monitored his progress, keeping an ear out for any noises and glancing into the kitchen from time to time. But fortunately, Amane managed to get dinner on the table without any major complications.

While he was cooking, a spicy aroma had drifted out of the kitchen to whet her appetite, and she'd started to suspect that he was making *keema* curry.

Amane had been the one to decide what he was making that day, and Mahiru had predicted that it might be curry. But she didn't know for sure that it was *keema* curry until he was plating it up.

"I made sure to taste it as I went, okay?"

Mahiru couldn't help but laugh at Amane when he reassured her. Perhaps he was unnerved by her staring, and he grumbled a little peevishly, "Guess you really don't trust me."

It was Mahiru's turn to pat Amane on the head as they took their seats.

Dinner was a simple menu of *keema* curry and salad, and at a glance, she couldn't spot any issues with it.

Amane had always been the type who could make things that tasted better than they looked, so long as he studied the recipe and faithfully followed along, so she hadn't been all that worried.

She glanced over at Amane and got a somewhat expectant look in return.

Mahiru normally made delicious meals, she knew. She expected that Amane was probably anxious to hear her appraisal of his cooking.

Amane looked strangely adorable as he fidgeted slightly, and Mahiru smiled in spite of herself.

"…What is it?"

"Nothing at all. All right, let's eat."

You're so cute.

Still smiling, she pressed her hands together and gave thanks for the food and for Amane, who had cooked it. Then she picked up her spoon.

Feeling his eyes on her, Mahiru brought Amane's homemade *keema* curry to her mouth. It had a gentle sort of flavor.

He had probably used restraint when adding the spices, since neither of them was a particularly big fan of spicy food.

A small amount of spiciness came through, but on the whole, the curry had a mellow, homey taste. More than anything else, the impression was that it simply tasted good.

The knowledge that Amane had made it was probably the best seasoning of all.

"…It's delicious."

"Yeah? I'm glad."

She gave her honest impression, and Amane must have been relieved, because his mouth spread into a soft smile, and he seemed to relax. Just as Mahiru was thinking that he looked younger and cuter than usual, grinning like that, she felt keenly aware that she had fallen head over heels for Amane.

Amane looked delighted as he also took a bite of his *keema* curry. Mahiru took another bite, then recalled Amane's past cooking and mumbled quietly, "You've really improved your culinary skills."

Amane had never been incapable of cooking, he was just awful at it out of a stereotypical lack of experience.

Luckily, his palate was normal, and in fact he was able to perceive more subtle flavors than most, probably thanks to his parents. And he was someone who thought things through rationally, which made it easy for him to understand the purpose of the various steps in the cooking process. So naturally, with a little experience, he made a capable cook.

“That’s because I’ve been looking at recipes I got from my mom, and helping you out in the kitchen a lot, and making an effort to practice on my own on the weekends. I’ve gotten better.”

“Oh-ho, impressive!”

“Well, I did rely on modern conveniences quite a bit this time. The seasoning is mostly thanks to the store-bought roux, and I cut up the vegetables with that device I bought the other day.”

Amane looked slightly apologetic as he poked at the finely cut vegetables in his keema curry with his spoon.

The “modern convenience” he was talking about was a handy tool he had recently bought that made it easy to finely chop vegetables by putting them in a case and pulling a cord to cut them up with an attached blade.

He had purchased it with the aim of saving time and simplifying the cooking process, and it had been more useful to Amane than to Mahiru.

Mahiru used it sometimes as well, when she was short on time, and thought it was good for some things, so she wasn’t opposed to using it or seeing it used. But Amane seemed to have some reservations.

“It’s made and sold because people need it, so you should go ahead and use it where you can. There’s no problem, as long as everything turns out edible and tasty.”

“Well, you’re right about that, but it made me realize how amazing you are, since you’re so skilled at using a kitchen knife. Being capable and being proficient are two totally different things, you know? I’m still just passable at best. Not just cooking but in other areas, too. I feel bad for depending on you so much, and I know it’ll cause issues going forward if I’m bad at housework.”

“You’re not wrong per se, but you do the shopping and all the manual labor. When people are living together, dividing up the chores is the most efficient way to do things. As you might expect, I’ll ask you to keep doing your own laundry, but otherwise, we can share the work and let our skills complement each other’s.”

She'd meant to express that she wasn't expecting perfection from Amane, but for some reason, he stiffened and dropped his spoon in his curry.

Luckily, he dropped it over the plate, so that was fine—if he had dropped it on the floor, it probably would have been a bit of a pain to clean up.

There was a little bit of curry on the handle, so Mahiru pulled out a wet wipe from the container that was sitting on the table and tried to hand it to Amane. But Amane just kept staring at her and didn't take it.

Wondering whether she had said something strange, Mahiru tilted her head in a forced way, and his dark eyes darted around the room as if he was distressed.

"…Ah, I, um—it's nothing."

"It doesn't seem like it was nothing."

"It's fine. Come on, let's eat while it's still hot."

He seemed as if he wanted to say something, but she could tell that whatever it was, she wasn't likely to coax it out of him.

Mahiru gave him a pointed look of disappointment, but Amane just accepted the wet wipe and wiped his spoon clean. He didn't open his mouth again to talk.

Amane silently shoveled his *keema* curry into his mouth and didn't look in her direction.

His face flushed slightly red as he ate the curry, though it wasn't very spicy, and he sighed as if he was having a hard time. Mahiru also sighed quietly and resumed eating.

Ultimately, after eating dinner, they spent the evening in their usual manner.

They washed the dishes together as they always did, laid out their homework and completed it, laughed together at whatever was on TV, and finally Mahiru went home to go to bed.

Though she would have liked to stay at Amane's place a little longer, she needed to get changed early and prepare for her first ever good-night phone call.

When Mahiru finished changing and was ready to get in bed, she took a look at herself and let out an unintentional sigh.

...I feel like I'm too excited for this.

Particularly since she wasn't making a video call. Still, she had spent longer in the bath than usual and taken a long time grooming her hair and skin for no reason. And she was wearing her new favorite nightdress, a (not see-through) white silk negligee decorated with lace that she had bought on a shopping trip with Chitose. Chitose had declared that it was "*absolutely to Amane's taste*."

Mahiru understood that girls valued fashion even when no one else could see it, but she had a feeling that this was less of a fashion statement and more like getting dressed for battle.

She wondered why she was getting so worked up, even though all she was doing was making a simple phone call.

And yet despite being so fully prepared, Mahiru was unable to make her move. She sat there with her smartphone displaying the call screen.

It was all very good to have decided to call him, but just what reason should she give for calling?

Neither of them was the type of person to call unless they needed something, so she really had no idea. She rarely ever called Amane to begin with, so a good-night phone call was beyond the pale.

I decided I would call, but what if I bother him?

She worried about interrupting him as he got ready for bed or waking him if he was already asleep. He might oversleep or get insufficient rest, because of her phone call.

The more she thought about it, the more her hesitation took control of her fingertips, and she couldn't even get them to tap the call button.

She'd always thought of Amane as cautious and a late bloomer, but she was even more of a wuss. She even felt a little bit like crying as she toppled over onto the bed, still clutching her smartphone in indecision.

She rested her phone on her chest and mumbled, "I should just give up." Just as she went to close the call screen—a jaunty melody began to stream from the phone.

She was stunned for a moment as the phone suddenly played a tune that she so rarely heard, but she soon realized that it was the sound of a phone call connecting and jumped up. Apparently, she had accidentally made the call.

Before she could cancel the call in a panic, she heard her own name whispered through the smartphone speaker in a curious tone of voice.

"Mahiru?"

His voice was somewhat lower and hoarser than it had been when she'd heard it several hours earlier, perhaps because he had been sleeping.

Still unprepared for what she had done, Mahiru looked timidly at the screen, on which was displayed the icon for a familiar chat application, conspicuously showing that there was a call in progress.

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“Did something happen? You don’t usually call this late.”

“Ah, n-no, um…it—it’s nothing, I just…s-sorry, did I wake you…?”

If she had woken him up, that would mean she had interrupted his sleep for her own amusement.

Surely, it was much too selfish of her to continue presuming upon Amane’s kindness, no matter how nice he was to her.

Mahiru bit her lip, ready for him to be angry with her, when she heard a small chuckle from the other end of the line.

“Nah, I already got ready for bed, but I wasn’t sleeping. It’s fine if you want to give me a call for no particular reason. It was just sudden, so it surprised me.”

“I—I guess it was. Sorry to call so suddenly…”

Surely, it must have been a nuisance for her to call right before bed without arranging it beforehand.

She had been so eager before, but now she just felt embarrassed, and her voice trailed off. But Amane maintained the same gentle tone and kindly murmured, “You really don’t have to apologize. I’m happy to hear your voice.”

Mahiru bit her lip even harder.

…That’s just not fair.

He spoke in a caring, apologetic tone, so as not to cause Mahiru any more anxiety than necessary, and whether he was aware of it himself or not, his words and voice were indulgent. Mahiru found the whole thing utterly endearing, and her heart began to ache in a different way than it ever had before.

She imagined Amane laughing at her slightly as she sat there silenced by shame and embarrassment at the loud, rhythmic pounding of her heart.

“…You couldn’t sleep?”

There was no criticism, just a question in a gentle voice. But Mahiru was unable to summon up an answer. She just stayed silent.

Not only had her reason for calling been selfish, but it was also the type of objective that she couldn’t come out and explain. There was just no way she could admit it to Amane.

But it would have felt dishonest not to give a reason for phoning at night, so she was greatly perplexed over how to explain it to him.

“I can’t sleep, either, so could we stay on the line a little longer?”

An easy, smooth, gentle voice came through the speaker. It freed Mahiru from the paralysis caused by the overwhelming embarrassment of the thought of honestly confiding in him.

His persistently kind voice wasn't asking for any kind of explanation. She could simply sense his earnestly peaceful and considerate heart.

"…Sure."

She understood that she was being very dishonest, but she didn't say anything about it and just took advantage of Amane's kindness.

Most likely, Amane really did think that Mahiru had been having trouble sleeping and had called him out of anxiety.

Maybe he understood that she would sometimes have nightmares and cry out in her sleep.

Amane let out a relieved sigh when Mahiru quietly agreed to stay on the phone, then chuckled quietly.

"Great… You know, we hardly ever talk on the phone like this, so it's kind of fresh and new."

"It…sure is. We are basically always together, so if I have anything to say, I can say it directly to you."

"Maybe it feels this way precisely because we're so close. You're always by my side, so I've just been saying things directly to you, too… This feels kind of funny, huh?"

"…Yeah."

Even though they were in neighboring apartments, and even though she spent most of her time over at his place, just the act of using the phone as an intermediary made it feel like a special time.

When she heard the sigh mixed with a hint of laughter come through the speaker, Mahiru's mind produced a ticklish sensation, as if that sigh was tracing slowly over her skin.

It felt nice and just a little bit tantalizing.

She lay down and twisted her body into a more comfortable position, while listening carefully with the phone to her ear.

"Come to think of it"—Amane spoke up on the other end of the phone, sounding like he had found a topic—"I forgot to ask you about it, but you said you went out with Chitose today, right?"

"Yes. Well, all we did was go to a café and talk, though."

"That's great, though, that you were able to relax. Was it fun?"

“Yeah. I always feel energized when I’m with Chitose-san; she really lifts my mood.”

“Good; as long as you had fun, that’s great. What do you two usually do when you hang out?”

“We don’t really do anything special, you know? We get drinks at a café, or go shopping and look at clothes and accessories, or see a movie…completely normal things.”

“Huh. And here I was sure that Chitose was dragging you around to all kinds of weird places.”

“If she heard you say that, she’d get mad and say, ‘How rude!’ you know?”

He seemed to be under the impression that Chitose was a real social butterfly, since she had a public image as an active person.

To be sure, Chitose was the outdoorsy type, and she did make her way to all sorts of places, but she would never force Mahiru to go along with her, and she knew plenty of places where normal high school girls could go to have fun.

Before she got to know Chitose, Mahiru had almost never gone out to have fun, so she was quite happy to have a friend to take her around like she did.

“Sometimes, she has information about places I would never go, or even connections there, so I figure it must be a little scary for you when she takes you to places you don’t know.”

“Well, she does sometimes take me with her to places I don’t know, but as you would expect, they’re safe and interesting places. The other day, she took me to a place where we could go bouldering. As you can imagine, I had never done it before, but it was fun.”

“Ah, bouldering? A long time ago, my mom took me to one of the places in my hometown, but I could hardly make it up the wall. Not as bad as someone who’s totally nonathletic, mind you.”

“Heh-heh. Now you could probably do a great job, I bet! You’ve been working so hard at your weight lifting and all.”

“I hope I’ve gotten at least a little bit stronger. Maybe you could show me that climbing gym sometime soon.”

“…Sure.”

She had agreed quite easily. But when she stopped to think about it, she realized that Amane had just asked her to go on an outing. Amane didn’t seem particularly worked up about it and was acting natural.

…Would that make it a…date?

If he just wanted to go to the bouldering gym, he could have asked Chitose. So if he was asking Mahiru to show it to him, she could probably take that to mean that he was asking because he wanted to go with Mahiru.

She had a feeling Chitose would have something to say about how unsexy the destination was, but at Amane's invitation, Mahiru's lips spontaneously curled into the arch of a smile.

"I'd be happy to go on an outing with you, Amane-kun."

She was grinning from ear to ear from the thrill of actually honestly expressing her feelings out loud, and no matter how she tried, there was no dampening her excitement.

She was glad from the bottom of her heart that Amane was not in the room with her. Surely, such an unguarded expression was not something fit for him to see.

Mahiru rolled back and forth on top of her bed, delighted at the prospect of an outing with the person she loved.

This alone made it worth calling.

It was probably her naïveté that made her go weak with joy.

The slight nervousness that had remained even after she started the phone call disappeared, and instead she felt relief and a sudden drowsiness.

She was in a happy mood, and the onset of sleepiness made her want to bask in that feeling all the more.

Mahiru was laughing silently to herself, noticing how difficult it was getting to hold her eyelids open, when she heard a quiet voice from the other end of the line.

"…So listen, could I ask you about something that's been on my mind?"

"…Something that's been on your mind?"

She quickly responded by asking him what it was, resisting the growing urge to doze off.

The somewhat hesitant voice on the other side of the phone continued, "So today you said something, and I'm not sure what you meant by it. Something about us complementing each other."

Mahiru considered his question, which was less articulate than usual, and then answered slowly.

"…You and I are always together, right? As long as we're…together like this, helping each other with our difficulties is the most efficient way to live…I think."

It almost went without saying, but it was more efficient for the person who was skilled at a task to be the one to handle it.

If Mahiru tried to do physical labor, it would take a while, and there might even be things that she simply could not do with her feminine physique.

When it came to cooking, if Amane did it, some ingredients would go to waste, and it might take extra time.

With the two of them there, they could make things easier by each taking charge of their areas of specialty, so it was obvious that that was what they should do.

When Mahiru answered in a soft, sleepy voice, Amane mumbled "…Yeah, like, that's true, but that wasn't exactly what I wanted to ask."

So then what are you asking…?

But instead of actually asking the question, Mahiru made a faint questioning sound in her throat, and an answer didn't seem forthcoming from Amane.

"No, never mind… If I ask you for the precise nuance, I might just die."

"…Why…?"

"I just will. It's fine, don't worry about it. I don't need to know."

Refusing so politely was Amane's way of clearly saying he wasn't going to answer any more questions about it.

When he got like this, Amane hardly ever said any more, no matter how she persisted, so it was best not to question him too insistently. He usually just said "*It's fine*" to pacify Mahiru.

"Never mind about me… More importantly, Mahiru, you must be sleepy?"

He could probably tell from her voice that Mahiru was losing her battle against sleep.

"Well, it's about time to hang up—"

"…No. Just a little longer…"

Even Mahiru thought she sounded a little childish, but she wanted to hear Amane's voice for just a little bit longer.

She hardly ever got a chance like this.

A chance to doze off while concentrating on Amane's voice.

Her fading sense of reason told her that she should stop this, that there must be limits to her selfishness, but all of her hesitation melted right away when she heard his gentle voice say, "Okay."

Relieved by his acceptance, she nervously leaned close to her smartphone, which she had laid down on top of the sheets, holding her chest, which was tingling with warmth.

"…Amane-kun, your voice is so calming and nice to listen to."

"I think that's the first time I've ever been told that."

“Oh, really…? It’s a soft, kind voice; I feel like I’m floating.”

The quality of his voice, mellow and clear and not too low, was earnestly gentle, mild, and indulgent.

Listening to those gentle whispers, mixed with quiet sighing, made her feel as though all of the strength was flowing right out of her body.

It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling; in fact, it felt nice.

His warm voice was only for her ears, and not for anyone else. It slowly lulled her into a sea of sleepiness on a tide of joy.

His voice permeated her body and gave her the sensation that she was floating on a cloud.

...I want to hear more.

She wanted him to say her name in that voice.

“…Is it really that nice?”

“Amane-kun, your voice…I really…love it. I want you to…call my name…more…”

Hearing him say her name was her favorite thing.

Before she met Amane, nobody had really called her by her first name.

Despite not loving their own child, Mahiru’s parents had nevertheless put some thought into her name, combining the character for *morning* from her father’s name and the character for *evening* from her mother’s to give her a name that invoked the afternoon. She had never liked it.

But ever since meeting and falling in love with Amane, she had come to appreciate her own name.

She really loved it when Amane called her simply Mahiru, not “the angel” or the last name that marked her as a member of the Shiina family.

Hearing him whisper it like this made her so, so happy.

It was a warm, fuzzy feeling.

As her thoughts drifted, Mahiru asked him to call her name.

She heard a noise from the other end of the call, and it almost sounded as if Amane had caught his breath or was having trouble swallowing something, which made Mahiru tilt her head to the side in puzzlement.

“Mahiru, listen—”

Amane said her name in a tone of voice like he had something he wanted to tell her, and Mahiru closed her eyes without really knowing why.

She felt as if she would be able to concentrate on his voice like that.

In a peaceful, blissful mood, she directed all her focus to her sense of hearing and could faintly make out the sound of breathing, like a quiet sigh.

"…No, don't worry about it."

He started to say something, then, sure enough, gave up on it and stopped talking. The phone speaker just vibrated with the quiet sound of his breath.

Even that regular rhythm was a delight to Mahiru, and she hummed contentedly and gave up on catching hold of her gently wavering thoughts. She simply drifted along in the comfortable silence.

As she nodded off, her own thoughts drifted even further afield, but somehow she perceived that as someone else's problem.

"Mahiru?"

After a short silence that had seemed very long to Mahiru, she heard Amane speak carefully, as though he was checking on her, in a voice that threatened to disappear into a little sigh.

Knowing that she had to answer, Mahiru tried to raise her voice, but a feeling of restful weariness would not permit her to give voice to any more words. She tried with all her might to speak up and only produced a quiet, hoarse moan.

Amane let out a sigh that sounded like a gentle laugh.

"…Good night, Mahiru."

With his voice, even gentler and sweeter than before, slowly tickling her eardrums, Mahiru could no longer hold out, and she surrendered herself to the irresistible drowsiness.

The following evening, when Mahiru went over to Amane's place as she always did after getting home from school and changing her clothes, she found that Amane was looking somewhat sullen.

He was waiting for her in the hallway before the living room, and he was obviously in a grumpy mood.

"So listen, don't you think it would be best to use restraint when it comes to phone calls before bed?"

At school, he had been giving her looks as though he had something he wanted to say, but of course she couldn't walk right up and ask him there, so she had been planning to do so once they were alone together. But…she had never expected him to complain, and she frowned.

Is it possible that I made a mistake calling Amane-kun yesterday…? Could he be offended that I fell asleep during the phone call that I initiated…?

She was the one who had called him, but partway through the call, she had been struck by drowsiness, and her memory of their conversation got hazy.

She had been halfway asleep, so she didn't really remember what she had said. Perhaps she had said something to antagonize Amane.

She wanted to believe that she hadn't said anything strange, but when she saw the way that Amane was glaring at her, she lost her confidence.

"D-did I say something careless…?"

"Not necessarily, but letting people see you or hear you when you're half-asleep is all pretty risky, I think."

He cautioned her very seriously, in a somewhat stiff tone of voice. Mahiru felt a sudden upwelling of regret and was convinced she had gone too far.

"I'm sorry, if my voice was unpleasant—"

"That's not it… It was…too relaxed, so I think it's unwise to let other people hear it."

"…Too relaxed?"

"Anyway, you can't. It's no good."

"…Even with you on the other end? If you don't like it…"

"It's not that I don't like it, it's just that…you shouldn't do it. Especially with me on the other end. My heart just can't take it, and I really… I just can't deal with it, okay?"

"Can't deal with it?"

"Never mind."

Mahiru shot Amane a look of unconcealed displeasure when he tried to avoid giving her a complete answer. But Amane seemed unlikely to give in and simply insisted, "Anyway, you just can't."

Upset by her utter lack of progress, Mahiru banged her balled-up fists softly against his upper arm in open protest.

She got the feeling that he was hiding something important, and it made her uncomfortable.

She searched Amane's face for an explanation, quite anxious that she had inadvertently said something strange, and Amane frowned, looking troubled, and then sighed loudly.

Mahiru began to tremble, convinced that his sigh had come from a place of disgust, when Amane gently reached for her.

Slowly, his bony fingers gently brushed aside a piece of hair that was hanging over her cheek. She could feel the cool air on her exposed ear as Amane bent forward a little and slowly brought his face close to hers.

"Mahiru, enough. You just shouldn't…okay?"

He was so close, and his gentle, charming voice and firm-but-soothing tone sent a strange, tingly shock shooting up her spine.

"Wah?!" An awkward squeak escaped Mahiru's mouth.

The sensation running through her body was less of a chill and more like an enticing sort of electricity she had never felt before.

His voice snatched away all the strength from her body and made her weak in the knees, as if she was melting from the inside out. She nearly fell on her rump right then and there, whereupon Amane immediately put an arm around her back and pulled her toward him, and she plunged into his chest.

She moved her mouth, but her voice didn't come out right.

…What a voice…

Both she and Amane made noises that they could never let other people hear.

Mahiru's because it was terribly pathetic. And Amane's because—

"…Are you all right?" Amane asked in a concerned tone as Mahiru's body went limp.

He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the sofa in her weakened state.

He moved more easily than before, and in a small corner of her heart, she was impressed by how much he had changed, while at the same time, his line from earlier played repeatedly in her mind, and the admiration she felt all transformed into a violently throbbing ache in her chest.

Amane looked at Mahiru, who was in a rough state, her heart still thumping loudly, and mumbled quietly, "Mahiru, your ears are super sensitive, huh?"

In a panic, Mahiru grabbed on to the hem of Amane's clothes, after he took a seat next to her.

"N-no, this is, um, because your voice…"

"My voice?"

"…It's extremely…not good. Very not okay at all."

She stared up at Amane beside her, wondering when he had learned to produce a voice with so much allure. Amane's eyes widened in a look of amazement, and then he sighed dramatically.

"…I also got the feeling that our conversation yesterday was a different type of thing, so I think that goes for both of us, but—"

“Ah—”

“Anyway, we shouldn’t do it again. Okay?”

Before she could ask for details, he grabbed her gently by the shoulders, and this time he spoke to her in a voice that was simply kind, looking her directly in the eyes as if he were trying to persuade a child of something, so Mahiru nodded meekly. If she had disagreed, he probably would have taken advantage of their proximity to whisper in her ear again until she acquiesced.

Mahiru was also having a hard time grappling with feelings she didn’t quite understand, so she figured that it was best to withdraw gracefully. And when she gave Amane a dissatisfied look, he gently but sternly raised his hand up to Mahiru’s ear to discourage her. She understood that he was telling her that for her own good, that she shouldn’t bring up this topic again, and she held her tongue.

...Somehow, I feel like I’m the one who’s become more aware of him and not the other way around.

She had tried calling Amane on the phone in order to get him to notice her, but ultimately, she was the one who ended up noticing new things about him.

All she had managed to do was to show him that her heart throbbed for him and she couldn’t calm down, so it was probably safe to say that her scheme was a failure.

Even as she thought that things really weren’t going well, the fact of the matter was that she was content to have learned about a side of Amane that she normally never saw or heard and to have settled down to sleep with a very happy feeling after being able to hear his voice right before bed. This was probably better than both of them becoming overly aware of the other and things getting awkward.

“…That’s just a little bit disappointing,” she mumbled quietly, then swallowed any last wisps of shame and shut her mouth tight.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this book.

I am the author, Saekisan. This is the first collection of short stories in *The Angel Next Door* series, so I hope you enjoyed it.

Actually, I never expected to get to put out a collection of short stories, you know? Amane and Mahiru reached a milestone in their relationship in Volume 4, which is exactly why I felt that it was time for a short story volume. But I'm extremely grateful to have gotten the chance to depict things that I wasn't able to depict before in a volume like this.

In the main series, for the most part, we only get to see things from Amane's perspective, so this volume is packed with stories that (I'd like to think) you can enjoy as a glimpse of what's been going on in the background.

This is occurring to me anew, but Mahiru really does love Amane, huh…? She's completely head over heels, isn't she? I wonder why she couldn't be more confident and make a love confession? I guess it's strange for the author to write that.

It's obvious that Amane is a loser, but each time I add another story, he continues to improve. Plus, he's turning out to be quite the "gigolo," so Mahiru is rapidly losing her patience.

Good luck, Amane! If you work hard, it's possible for you to become an ideal man (but asserting that Amane is an ideal man feels a little counter to my reading of his character).

This time, I included some stories not just from Mahiru's perspective but from Chitose and Itsuki, the characters who are watching the couple from the sidelines. I can't deny feeling that they turned out to be pretty serious stories.

One way or another, Itsuki, Chitose, and even Yuuta are having a hard time of it.

I feel bad for Yuuta, who (I'm awful for saying it, but) got pretty traumatized because of Itsuki and Chitose's business. Because of the damage he suffered, and after

watching his two friends grapple with romance, he may or may not be a late bloomer in love, too, for different reasons than Amane. I hope he finds a wonderful girlfriend someday.

And then there are the incredible illustrations by Hanekoto that we got to adorn this volume, each one of them the best of the best. This time, there were three versions of the cover, one for the regular edition, one for the special edition, and one for the pamphlet that went with the special edition, and each one of them had destructive power beyond compare. I love them all.

Through a Twitter poll for the special edition pamphlet illustration, we determined that it would be a seductive-looking Mahiru, but isn't she a little too seductive? She's a full-on devil. She looks erotic but not vulgar, and I think it's really great to see her in a sexy state. (How can I even say that?)

And why wasn't Mahiru's figure more visible in this scene?! was probably something you asked yourself in this volume.

That's right, there was a bathtub scene, wasn't there?

There was a good reason for that, or rather, as you might expect, there's another bathtub scene coming up with Amane's— (Here the writing cuts off abruptly.)

Leaving that aside, at some point you'll get a chance to see her…maybe! At some point! Probably!

So then we've come to the end, and it's time to thank everyone who helped me.

I am truly grateful to the people whose efforts got this book published: the chief editor; everyone in the editorial department at GA Books; everyone in the sales department; the proofreader; Hanekoto; everyone at the printer's; and all of you who picked up a copy.

Let's meet again in the next volume. The next one is part of the main story!

Thank you so much for reading to the very end!

Author

Saekisan

An author whose staple foods are sugar and frustration?!

Their taste for sugar has gone all weird lately, and they can no longer tell if something is sweet or not.

Loves the frustration of mutually one-sided love, and lovey-dovey stuff, too.

Illustrator

Hanekoto

A freelance illustrator living in Hokkaido.

Has recently learned to appreciate sake.

It’s become gradually more difficult to include feathery elements (ha-ha).